

"THE WAY A MAN DOES DO THINGS":  
EPIC MASCULINITY, GRAND NARRATIVE AND  
IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE IN SELECTED  
TWENTIETH CENTURY NOVELS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**"The Way a Man Does Do Things": Epic Masculinity, Grand Narrative  
and Ideological Discourse in Selected Twentieth Century Novels**

**by**

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**A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
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**Department of English Language and Literature  
Faculty of Arts  
Memorial University of Newfoundland**

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## ABSTRACT

### "The Way a Man Does Do Things": Epic Masculinity, Grand Narrative and Ideological Discourse in Selected Twentieth Century Novels

This study posits a complex set of interrelationships between narrativity, epic masculine images, and ideologically motivated critical practices. Focusing on the work of Evelyn Waugh, Sam Selvon, Paule Marshall, and J.M. Coetzee, the project examines the degree to which idealized visions of masculinity and manhood operate as "grand narratives," epic story-structures which frame the individual's consciousness and override his ability to perceive, and undermine his ability to operate productively in, the "real" world. The study places consistent emphasis on the degree to which the world of stories can become more meaningful and more influential than any kind of direct experience, the degree to which characters come to live inside distinct story worlds. Inherent in such an approach is an acknowledgment of the slippage between ontological categories like "real" and "imaginary." The study frequently considers pervasive narrative structures as real things by virtue of the force they seem to wield, while at the same time considering certain real experiences and opportunities as ontologically deficient by virtue of the force they seem to lack.

As a study of masculinity, this project focuses on several masculine signposts and establishes relationships between particular masculine benchmarks and particular narrative forces. Different masculine imperatives are viewed in terms of some relationship to the "storied" figure of the Ideal Man. The first chapter addresses the icon of the gentleman soldier relative to Waugh's war trilogy, *Sword of Honour*. The second addresses Selvon's Moses trilogy, emphasizing the connection between the masculine impulse for sexual conquest, and some corresponding anxieties about material prosperity and public visibility. The third deals with Marshall's novels, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Praisesong for the Widow*, highlighting the emotional stasis that seems to accompany any masculine acceptance of the traditional of "Breadwinner." The fourth chapter, addressing Coetzee's *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*, engages Coetzee's complex treatment of the anxieties associated with the father's role, as "begetter," in the life some type of offspring.

The investigation of ideological critical practices (in particular certain practices in postcolonial and feminist thinking) takes place in every chapter, and extends the examination of unproductive grand narratives to include critical approaches which adhere too rigidly to the "storylines" stipulated by particular critical discourses. The study posits a close relationship between the delusions (generated by stories) that trouble particular characters in the selected novels, and the shortcomings (generated by discourse) of particular critical approaches, and suggests that *any* overdeveloped adherence to the plot of any type of grand narrative debilitates the individual's ability to productively perceive his or her surroundings, literal or literary. Close attention is paid to the current shortcomings in the critical oeuvre of each author to demonstrate this point. In every case, the preoccupations of some critical discourse seem to have obscured, if not outright overlooked, certain key aspects of the literary text, aspects which seem obvious when the text is viewed from outside the grand narrative of the ideological critical apparatus.

## **Dedication**

For my parents and for Meghan, who made this, and so much else, possible.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## **List of Abbreviations**

The following abbreviations will be used in this study:

### **Chapter One**

*MA* = *Men at Arms*

*OG* = *Officers and Gentlemen*

*TAR* = *Toward the African Revolution*

*US* = *Unconditional Surrender*

*VB* = *Vile Bodies*

### **Chapter Two**

*LL* = *The Lonely Londoners*

*MA* = *Moses Ascending*

*MM* = *Moses Migrating*

### **Chapter Three**

*BGBS* = *Brown Girl, Brownstones*

*PSW* = *Praisesong For the Widow*

### **Chapter Four**

*MP* = *The Master of Petersburg*

## Introduction

In some, very basic, sense, this study is a straightforward piece of literary criticism, focusing upon the work of four novelists and a total of ten novels. The novelists are Evelyn Waugh, Sam Selvon, Paule Marshall, and J.M. Coetzee. The novels are *Men at Arms*, *Officers and Gentlemen*, *Unconditional Surrender*, *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending*, *Moses Migrating*, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Foe*, and *The Master of Petersburg*.

Beyond this very basic sense, however, there are some more complicated, more abstract, and more unstable matters, matters which are not always strictly "literary" in the traditional sense. Indeed, this study considers the relationship between "basic" and "abstract" views to be a key part of its academic investigation. Directly concerned with several different strains in critical and contemporary thought, this project has been very much influenced both by the porous nature of academic, socio-political and ontological borders, *and* by the need to somehow calibrate and organize consciousness within some kind of workable framework. Ludomir Doležel has rightly said that, "in our interdisciplinary age, we cannot feel comfortable in splendid isolation" (2), but, however unsplendid isolation was, it did at least provide a stable and reliable method for approaching a well-defined subject area. Without such a methodology, the already-fraught process of establishing critical mass can become virtually hopeless because, in such situations, it becomes nearly impossible to establish what one absolutely needs to know in order to proceed with an investigation. The precise nature of "literary analysis" in such a climate is no longer clear, while the general nature of interdisciplinary analysis

has yet to be established. This situation is, in part, an outcropping of what George McCartney calls a “general disillusionment with the notion of absolutes” (2), and has had the liberating effect of opening up new territories, academic and otherwise, for a number of people; it has also made it harder for people to know where they belong, or, in aggravated cases, *if* they belong anywhere.

In this dissertation, the dual nature of the collapse, more properly the deconstruction, of old methodologies and viewpoints is approached not simply as a matter of academic procedure; it’s also the primary focus in terms of academic subject. More broadly, the slippage between stable and unstable frameworks is viewed as a matter of basic human survival insofar as certain cognitive frameworks work to establish limits and possibilities inside an individual’s, and inside a culture’s, consciousness. Crudely, these frameworks, or the absence of these frameworks, tend to dictate what can be done, what should be done, and, quite often, how things ought to be done.<sup>1</sup> An overdetermined, too rigid framework stifles the subject; an ill-defined, underdetermined one leaves the subject feeling unmoored and confused.

The cognitive framework which dominates this study is story. Throughout this dissertation, a character’s ability to recognize, situate and contest stories and/or narrative constructions is inextricably linked to his or her ability to function in a productive manner. An overdeveloped allegiance to an ill-fitting storyline has negative

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<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, commonplace disjunctions regarding the method of citation (MLA, APA etc.) at interdisciplinary academic conferences. The intersection of various fields, each with its own characteristic forms of expression, results in either disunity (everybody does what he or she likes), or in some weighing or ranking of the various discourses (such that everyone conforms to a single framework). Such experiences, in their own tedious way, demonstrate both the liberty and the potential for loss when we extend beyond our own idiosyncratic frames.

consequences, while the critical capacity to distinguish between narrative constructs brings, in all cases, productive results. In his fine book *The Power of the Story*, Michael Hanne suggests that stories represent:

the radar-like mechanism we use to constantly scan the world around us, [the mechanism] by which we give order to, and claim to find order in, the data of experience. If we cannot narrate the world in this everyday manner, we are unable to exercise even the slightest degree of control, or power, in relation to the world. (8)

In Hanne's account, story is a kind of universal power governing consciousness and, by extension, "the world," but his construction makes it clear that orientation toward story is as important as story itself. The implied distinction between reading and narrating the world is a crucial one for this study, one that highlights, again, the problem of confronting either a too-narrow or an unmapped world. Crudely, reading the world involves a well-developed devotion to a pre-existent framework in the form of an established story, while narrating the world carries with it the heavy responsibility of establishing and legislating a kind of order onto the disparate strands that make up "the data of experience." In most cases, the characters in this study, faced with fluctuating and ill-defined environments, find it impossible to narrate the world, and, in the absence of any more idiosyncratic type of narrative, they seek shelter in the limited but recognizable terra firma of well-established stories, or grand narratives.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, I borrow from Hanne's use of the term grand narrative as it refers to "certain overarching sets of... assumptions structured in narrative terms." These include "the entire range of narratives which have functioned at certain times as legitimating frameworks shared by whole societies. They are

The characters to be addressed in this dissertation seek this shelter in the form of those narratives which revolve around traditional visions of heroic masculinity. Unable to narrate their own lives, these characters view their own legitimacy in terms of the framework established by masculine stories and myths, and they consider a place in this grand narrative to be a pressing and urgent personal need. That is, they begin to think and feel in the terms dictated by the grand narrative rather than in terms of some framework which might better serve their individual needs. The result is a life lived in service of an "overarching" (Hanne 12) story rather than an individual self, an existence where the power of narrative outweighs and obscures the raw data of experience.

This situation is hardly unique to these ten works of fiction. It's a major field of academic investigation and a major problem for certain kinds of emancipatory discourse. The persuasive power of linguistic configurations like stories is recognized by Wittgenstein, who acknowledges that our visions of truth and reality can suffer from "the bewitchment of our senses by means of language" (47).<sup>3</sup> But, however well-documented these witches become, we cannot, nor it seems do we really want to, escape them. Quite the opposite, the critic of language (or discourse or story) makes a deal with his or her devil every time s/he communicates, warning the listener to be on guard, while simultaneously asking or demanding that s/he listen. Postcolonial and feminist

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controlling narratives of which the individuals and groups who live within them are not even perhaps consciously aware" (Hanne 12). Hanne acknowledges Lyotard as influential in the construction of his account.

<sup>3</sup> The interconnectedness of truth and discourse has, of course, extended to the point where certain types of post-structuralist thought believe that notions like "the self" and "reality" are in fact delusions created by discourse. My own study makes the much more modest suggestion that story worlds are, as it were, laid on top of something called the actual world, a world which, to use Thomas Pavel's phrase, "enjoys a definite ontological priority" (57) over the world of story.

discourses often work in the same conflicted way, exposing old (white, male, patriarchal) "truths" as mere contingencies while, at the same time, claiming a kind of unassailable validity for newer, presumably less problematic, truths. In these cases, the shady logic arises from a desire to avoid the conflicts inherent in total liberation, total freedom from our various bewitchments. As Kim Worthington rightly notes, "the celebration of autonomy is seemingly inseparable from the fear of uncertainty and the spectre of meaninglessness" (3). And, however problematic existing structures are, a "life lived without recourse to the... authority of extra personal grounds" (Worthington 4) is not an unproblematic one; it's a life where the whole concept of value is threatened, where the fully liberated self lacks a system with which to make important and necessary differentiations.<sup>4</sup> Even when we agree that truth is malleable (and hence not really truth in the old sense), we still want the things we say to have weight, to have meaning, and this is difficult to achieve without appealing to standards, standards which we might have discredited in the process of our own arguments. The trick for both academic and wider cultural discourses is to find a way to speak persuasively and with authority without being reductive and authoritarian. Or, from the opposite perspective, the trick is to admit the dubious underpinnings of our project without undermining the project altogether. We need, it seems to me, some notion of truth to give weight and significance to the things we think and do; we just have a difficult time determining the limits and the boundaries of what truth is, whom it belongs to, or how many versions of it are out there.

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<sup>4</sup> Worthington phrases this idea in another way when she says that "rules... are necessary to make deviance from the rules both meaningful and intentional" (10-11).



In academic terms, this conundrum is played out in terms of the simultaneous threats of meaninglessness (as exemplified in the most evasive and inconclusive theory) and heavy-handed dogmatism (as embodied in the unexamined assurances of old-school textual criticism), but these two positions, and the swampland that marks the space between them, can be seen as a fairly straightforward extension of the political and intellectual history of the Twentieth Century, a century marked by long and bitter battles over whose truth, and whose vision, the world would finally reflect. The travesties committed in the name of imperialism and fascism, and in the cause of the Cold War, reflect both the malleability and the intransigence of truth. Although the *content* of truth was and is different for different people and cultures, the force of each vision of truth was (and is) enough to shape reality in emphatic ways. The obvious insanity and plain falsity of fascism did not make it any less a reality to those who suffered under it and any less the truth to a great many of those who perpetuated (and perpetuate) it. Inside their own individual frameworks, fascists, communists, and capitalists are all pursuing particular kinds of truths, truths which reflect the basic assumptions of particular grand narratives. And, the extreme nature of some of their actions, the complete lack of equivocation, demonstrates the substantiality of the structures which dictate "the nature of reality" (a reality that may well be rooted in a fiction) in each individual case.<sup>4</sup>

With all of this in mind I undertake this study as a method of investigating both the futility of rigidly controlling borders and the absurdity of courting an unmapped,

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<sup>4</sup> Obviously, each ideological framework has resulted in different types and different degrees of tragedy. I make no particular case as to the merit of such frameworks. It is important just to note that, together, these three visions about the "true" nature of the world established the material, cultural, and political realities of hundreds of millions of people throughout the Twentieth Century.

undifferentiated world. The argument has three distinct aims: i) to investigate the pervasive role of narrative in the construction of the individual's worldview, ii) to show how the fictional nature of masculine narratives derail the male characters' ability to perceive their realities, and iii) to demonstrate that the ideological preoccupations of postcolonial criticism compromise the discourse's ability to handle the fictional worlds stipulated by "unconventional" postcolonial writers.<sup>6</sup>

### **Story Worlds: Narrative as Foundational Structure**

An early version of this study used the term "fictions of masculinity" in its title, a term that was intended to refer to the fictional nature and the constructedness of traditional visions of the male role. In this conception, traditional masculinity was a kind of falsehood, a fairy-tale that existed in direct opposition to real men and their hopes, beliefs and dispositions. This largely sociological viewpoint has been forwarded by a number of critics and finds one of its most succinct articulations in Andrew P. Williams' belief that:

Arbitrarily constructed images of "the ideal man" have historically served as templates for measuring social expectations of appropriate masculine

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<sup>6</sup> In this study, I posit Waugh, Selvon, Marshall, and Coetzee as just such "unconventional" writers. Waugh's political orientation, Selvon's suspicions about political and racial "activism," Marshall's complicated view of feminism and masculinity, and Coetzee's insistence on the importance of aesthetics (even in the face of political injustice) have all been subject to some sort of ideological policing which has strongly influenced the nature of their reception (or lack thereof) by postcolonial critics and theorists. This project investigates the nature of the individual texts relative to the nature of conventional postcolonial treatments, highlighting the shortcomings of existing approaches.

behaviour. However, ideal forms of manhood and manliness are nothing more than fictions of gender and wishful thinking. (xii)

Looking at the male role in this fashion can, I think, be instructive inasmuch as such a conception does emphasize the contingent nature of masculine ideals. But, as a cognitive framework for a study like this, its inadequacies lie in its too-confident dismissal of narrative force and its too-ready assumption that a clean distinction can be made between a “merely” fictional self and some really real temporal self. This study views the boundaries between fictional and real selves in a complicated fashion, emphasizing the difficulties inherent in any effort to extricate one from the other, and examining the possibility that the real self, insofar as it exists at all, might be the result of narrative processes.

When Williams says that ideal forms of masculinity are “nothing more” than fictions, he fails to recognize how really powerful fiction can be and how really muddy the border between fact and fiction can become: in my view, fictions can provide *nothing less* than the operational framework of the individual’s life such that the term fiction, in the usual sense, ceases to be really appropriate and must be replaced with less specifically imaginary terms like “story” and “narrative.” As the examples in the previous section were meant to indicate, make-believe assumptions (like those encoded in racist and sexist thought) are not the exclusive property of imaginary states; they influence and become real events. However fictitious the *content* of the masculine ideal may be, it makes no sense to think of it as an imaginary thing in the same way that we think of unicorns and leprechauns. Masculine ideals may be wishful thinking, but the wishes come true and we

see them, or at least their struggling little brothers, walking down the street almost every day.

For the characters in these novels, the line between fiction and non-fiction is not always clear and, when it is, the imaginary is more potent than the real and the characters *live* and think most vividly in the framework that their favourite stories provide. In most cases, an examination of their imaginations (or even an examination of their bookshelves) reveals more than an examination of their lives and it becomes appropriate to think of them as real fictions, or fictional realities in the strongest sense: they are stories come to life. To use Nicholas Rescher's elegant metaphor, "*Homo Sapiens* is an amphibian who lives in the realm of reality and in the realm of possibility as well" (37), and possible worlds are as natural a habitat as any concrete situation can hope to be.

In his brilliant book *Fictional Worlds*, Thomas Pavel explores the boundaries between real and fictional frameworks.<sup>7</sup> My own conception of the way stories circulate, the way "fictional content... rebounds" (Pavel 84) and influences the actual world, owes a great deal to his lucid explanations. Pavel, drawing on narratological theories of possible worlds, describes the function of fiction in terms of distinct universes which exist on different ontological levels than what he calls "the really real world" (57). Fictional worlds arise out of the actual world inasmuch as they originate in the real world, but, if

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<sup>7</sup> Doležel's book *Heterocosmica* makes similar distinctions between the ontological status of "nonexistent entities" and the status of "fictional worlds". In Doležel's view the study of "fictionality" is bounded by two major questions: "(1) what is the ontological character of nonexistent or fictional particulars (golden mountain, Odysseus, the present king of France); and (2) what is the logical status of fictional representations, especially the reference of fictional terms and the truth-conditions of fictional sentences" (1). His study, occupied primarily with rigid investigations into the logical and philosophical tenability of "fictional worlds of literature" relative to "possible worlds" is outside the scope of my investigation in a number of ways, but his illuminating synopsis of the discourse surrounding these questions, although little cited in this study, has been instrumental in establishing the framework of some of my arguments about story and fiction.

the fictional world is persuasive and effective, it subsequently becomes an autonomous structure that “includes entities and states of affairs that lack referents” (57) in the real world. While a story is, at one level, a collection of words encountered in a real world location (the living room, the subway etc.), at another, more significant level, it is the basis of its own independent universe, one which does not derive its authority through direct reference to the real world, but through its presentation of its own set(s) of assumptions and relations.

Because the story posits a largely independent universe, it cannot be readily accessed if the reader (or listener) clings too tightly to his or her origins in the real world. To reach the fictional world, the reader must travel a certain amount of emotional, psychological, and cognitive distance, and, as with most journeys, this involves leaving the starting point behind. The commonplace description of someone “really getting into the book s/he’s reading” is revealing because it recognizes the reader’s investment in the story and the shift (the movement *into* the book) that this investment creates. At a certain ontological level, the active reader of *Jane Eyre* is in Nineteenth Century England and the active viewer of *The Tempest* is on a magic island because his or her consciousness is most directly aimed at the imaginary, rather than the actual world. Conversely, an indifferent or distracted reader can remain entirely in the actual world even if s/he processes all of the words on the page or hears everything being said on the stage. If one is too preoccupied with the temperature of the real world room or the comfort of the real world seat, the movement into the fictional world is interrupted and no new set of relations takes over. (This is why teachers are so adamant when they tell their students to

read in quiet places for at least half an hour at a time. They know that real reading can't be done in the space afforded by a commercial because one can't make the transworld journey in such a lackadaisical fashion.)

The relationship between the story and the reader/listener is a kind of courtship, which can lead to something as serious as lifelong commitment or as little as nothing at all. And, like most intimate relationships, the one between the story and its subject begins with a seduction scene that, generally, either works or it doesn't. Different readers<sup>4</sup> have different tastes and some of us are more resistant (or pliable) to certain wiles than we are to others. If the reader isn't intrigued, then the journey isn't made and the relationship isn't consummated; if s/he is intrigued then a great deal can happen and a whole new set of assumptions can take over. Crudely, the fictional world, once stipulated, awaits activation by the seduced reader; it can do nothing with absolute indifference, but, if the reader is seduced into participating in the story's world, if the reader moves across the border into the new universe, the balance of power can shift dramatically and the story, once the helpless suitor, gains the upper hand inasmuch as the reader now exists in the world the story stipulates not the one from which s/he originated. If this sounds sinister and vampiric, it's not exactly accidental. As Doležel notes, "the fictional world cannot be altered or contested" (26) in the same way the real can, and, as a result, there is a loss of control inherent in the transfer into the new realm. For a

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<sup>4</sup> For the sake of style, I will use the word "reader" throughout this section to refer to any "story subject" regardless of the conditions under which the story is communicated. Thus, despite some significant differences, listeners and even viewers of visual narratives will fall under the one common category.

number of the characters in these books, the decision to “invite story in” has disastrous consequences with respect to individual autonomy.

This said, the movement into story worlds does not necessarily need to be a violent or hostile experience. One of the great pleasures of reading involves the exploration of the new and strange territories fictional worlds create. Readers, outside of first year students doing required courses, are rarely kidnapped by stories. They aren’t dragged into the story’s world; they’re lured there because the fictional world seems to make sense and have merit. The problem is that a lot of us want to stay forever because the harmonious organization of the story-world (the way everything fits together and moves toward a particular end) compares so favourably with the disorganization and clutter of our daily lives. Good stories *seem* complicated and compelling, but the worlds they stipulate are incredibly streamlined relative to the lack of cohesion, the number of possibilities and the sheer enormousness of the really real world.<sup>9</sup> This is one of the central paradoxes of story worlds. They seem complicated and compelling precisely because they are reductive and simple enough to be considered as a single coherent entity. Thus constituted, however, they offer only incomplete, selectively constructed, accounts of the totality of life in the actual world.

Many narrative theorists have viewed the limitation of scope as a defining feature of, and a necessary feature for, the function of stories. Doležel makes incompleteness one of the defining features of fictional worlds (22), while Michael Hanne views story’s power in terms of its tendency to “discard massive quantities of material which we deem

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<sup>9</sup> To borrow another of Rescher’s apt metaphors, “reality is to fiction as chess is to tic-tac-toe” (35).

to be unimportant" (8) and to insist instead on "the few items we regard as significant" (8). This selective policy makes the fictive universe a highly charged and exciting reality filled almost entirely with significant events. For a lot of us, these dense and highly ordered worlds exist in extreme contrast with our daily lives, which tend to be filled with "massive quantities" of meaningless material. Narrative worlds are smaller than the actual world because everything means something and this is attractive because, as Rescher notes, "in the real objective reality of nature and of history there is no selection: not by importance, not by merit, not by purpose" (36). In Rescher's view "reality is totally unfocused" (36) and requires a point-of-view to render it meaningful. Stories provide this service in a particularly rarefied and persuasive way:

The linear flow of narrative fiction with its one-thing-at-a-time focus of attention is singularly well fitted for [the] portrayal of human reality. It may not afford an optimal instrument for depicting reality as nature encompasses it, but it is well attuned to the portrayal of reality as we experience it. (36)

Story, it seems, provides an almost entirely *meaningful* universe, a universe oriented around human preoccupations rather than natural realities.

The density of meaning in story-worlds and the paucity of meaning in the real world can destabilize the relations between primary and secondary universes. Consider Pavel's statements about the function of myth:

Societies that believe in myths unfold[] at two different levels: the profane reality, characterized by ontological paucity and precariousness,



contrasts with a mythical level, ontologically self-sufficient, containing a privileged space and a cyclical time. Gods and Heroes inhabit the sacred space, but this space is not felt [to be] fictional: if anything, it is endowed with *more* weight and stability than the mortals' space. (77)

In these cultures, the unseen world carries more weight than the seen and felt one.

Indeed, "in the eyes of its users, a myth exemplifies the very paradigm of truth" (Pavel 76) such that factual, real world existence becomes a transparent indicator of lower-level significance:

The mythological mind is said to distinguish between at least three kinds of statements: factual statements, which cover everyday life, true statements, referring to gods and heroes, and fictions, which include stories other than myths (fables, funny moral stories). (Pavel 41)

And, while "factual statements" are in a kind of stable secondary position relative to myths, the interrelationship between the first and third categories of myth and fiction can be complicated and depend on the orientation of the story subject.

These are not casual or incidental matters. They affect the foundational assumptions of the individual and form the frame for his or her perception of the world. The positioning of certain key stories in the individual's consciousness can determine a great deal about his or her life. The decline in Christian religious sentiment in the Western world over the last several decades can be seen in terms of a transfer between the first category and the third, between eternal truth and make-believe. For a number of people, the stories in the Bible no longer operate as divine truths and instead seem like

dramatic presentations or fables, tales that were made up to demonstrate various points. At the same time, others continue to believe in every word as a manifestation of God and use the stories in the Bible to direct their lives in all matters of major importance. Their different orientations to a single significant text are such that the two groups (and there are many subsets) do not, and probably cannot, live in the same ontological space, in the same world. Although they clearly meet on the street and argue on talk shows, their lives are rooted in different ontological universes. When we say people are “worlds apart,” we might in fact be referring to disparities in mythic structures, situations where the realities of different groups or individuals are constituted by the positioning of different stories as either eternal truths or insignificant fancies.<sup>10</sup>

The above example is not meant to question or advocate religious belief systems, but rather to demonstrate both the fluidity and the potency of story in establishing and maintaining distinct ontological universes. While the consequences of the distinction between story and truth are enormous, the border between the two is not rigid. Pavel's account emphasizes “the flexibility of fictional worlds and their readiness to enter into the most diverse arrangements” (136); these arrangements include “the transferring of an event across the border of legend” (77) and into some new and different ontological space. Significantly, the border is fluid in both directions. Pavel tells us that “when a mythological system gradually loses its grip on a society, the ancient gods and heroes start to be perceived as fictional characters” (41), but so too fictional characters and

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<sup>10</sup> In their book *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, using the uproar over Orson Welles' *The War of the Worlds* as an example, note that “the classification of a narrative into fiction and non-fiction is of utmost significance: not only is it a precondition for making sense of a work, but it determines how we should respond in thought and action” (30). As I have already suggested, the inability of the characters in this study to make this classification causes many crises of thought and action.

events can slide into the mythic realm. And, because myth can help to establish the framework for real world action, once-fictional entities can start showing up in the primary, actual universe.<sup>11</sup> “Cult and fiction differ merely in the strength of the secondary [fictional or mythic] universe. When sufficient energy is channelled into mimetic acts, these may leave the fictional mode and cross the threshold of actuality” (Pavel 60). In situations where the *secondary* universe is of *primary* importance, a kind of transworld displacement takes place where fiction leapfrogs past actuality into myth, after which point the new mythology filters back into, inscribes itself onto, the actual world.

All of the primary characters in this study exist in unstable cultural and physical spaces which are, in almost every case, aggravated versions of the broad cultural flux outlined above. In unstable situations, they feel an acute kind of transworld displacement, one which makes it difficult to differentiate between primary and secondary universes. Whether contending with the madness and mundanity of war, the racist undertones and psychic overload of urban life, or the unmapped nothingness of a desert island, these characters are, in every case, placed in situations which either deny their most deeply held beliefs, or which stunt the construction of productive beliefs in the first place. The challenge is to make sense of the world in the absence of workable foundational assumptions. As necessary and sustaining truths tumble to the status of groundless and impotent fictions, the characters re-route their sensibilities in order to

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<sup>11</sup> Examples of this range from commonplace trivialities, as when a T.V. character sparks a fashion trend, to large-scale world events, as when political leaders use the rhetoric and terminology of make-believe to justify real international policies (Ronald Reagan’s “Star Wars” program, for example).

construct some kind of new mythos that might stabilize a world that has, from their individual perspectives, become completely unglued. The culturally untenable nature of certain truths results in an increase in the amount of energy channelled into other ideas and ideals. This increase in energy allows certain fictions to move "across the border of legend" and achieve "mythification" (Pavel 77), a state which allows a story to operate as a paradigm of truth. The most important of these stories is the one pertaining to the masculine ideal.

### **Fictional Reality: The Slippery Status of Masculinity as Academic Subject and Discursive Framework**

The fictional nature and the mythic function of idealized masculinity has been much discussed in recent years, as the study of masculinity has grown from a barely existent sub-section of gender studies into a significant interdisciplinary subject. The titles of some of the major works in the field reveal the contested nature of masculinities and the need to situate them inside contemporary and historical frameworks. Consider the following studies: *The Changing Fictions of Masculinity* by David Rosen, *Real Boys* by William Pollack, *The Myth of Masculinity* by Joseph Pleck, *Writing Masculinities* by Ben Knights, *Writing Men* by Berthold Schoene-Harwood. Each one, in one way or another, intersects with narrative problems outlined in the previous section. The distinctions between what is fiction, what is real and what is myth are at the very centre of the study of men and masculinities and lead to a number of logical and methodological

problems for those who wish, in their various ways, to investigate a still-functioning cultural fiction/reality/myth<sup>12</sup>.

The different emphases indicated by the above titles reflect the elusive nature of masculinity both as a cultural and historical reality, and as a subject of academic study. Because masculine ideals are often seamlessly embedded into the fabric of our cultures and societies, they have proven to be extremely difficult subjects for isolated study. Linguistic sign is forever spilling into historical reality; social formation of character butts up against the subconscious desires of individual psyches. The result has been a cross-disciplinary scramble to explain masculinity in terms of the frameworks of individual academic departments, or, alternately, a bland and generalized agreement that masculinity is out there, it's bad, and it should be challenged and changed. In his introduction to the 1975 study *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role* (a study co-edited with Deborah S. David), the psychologist Robert Brannon speaks of the difficulty of "essentially defining a new area of study... one that does not yet have a core of work that can be considered essential for inclusion" (vii). Nearly twenty years later, in 1992, Peter Middleton finds himself contending with the same absence of structure:

The men's movement, even more than the women's movement, is a decentralized heterogeneous network of magazines, small consciousness-raising groups, gay men's organizations, and alliances within

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<sup>12</sup> I do not mean to suggest that every study uses the terms "fiction", "reality" and "myth" in the same fashion. Clearly, they do not. Some use words such as fiction and myth to denote simple falsehoods or fallacies while others refer quite specifically to the existence of particular works of fiction and to classical mythologies in their attempts to account for masculinity and its function. These differences are, to me, unproblematic and even instructive insofar as they demonstrate the shifting nature and position of the masculine storyline in various subject groups.

psychotherapeutic movements. There is no general theory, political structure or social background which unites these [groups]. (49)

The lack of a stable canon persists today, with the significant difference that the volume of study on masculinities has exploded. This explosion is best expressed statistically: the MLA database lists twelve entries before 1980, and 1060 since 1991<sup>13</sup> I share, I think, with most students of literature a distrust for strictly numerical arguments, but such arguments are the only ones available (short of an item by item list of thousands of entries) in a field, or fields, as wildly disorganized as those involving masculinity To borrow from the previous section, the discourse of masculinity has no linearly progressing storyline. There do not seem to have been any truly landmark studies in the field,<sup>14</sup> and the study of masculinity has been marked by rapid expansion *outward* in several divergent directions rather than forward toward any particular goal. The numerous and various studies that have appeared since 1975 have done very little to address Brannon's concern over the absence of a definitive "core of work." There is no canon; the bibliographies seldom overlap, and, when they do, the connections between the various projects are slight and the use of citation perfunctory.

For someone trained in the field of literature, this instability creates its own kind of anxiety. Without some type of canonical structure, without some framework, however fuzzy, organizing the discourse, it is difficult to contextualize and prioritize the various

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<sup>13</sup> This data is current as of September, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> David Gilmore's anthropological study, *Manhood in the Making* has been highly influential and, more recently, Peter Middleton's work, borrowing as it does from the field of linguistics, psychoanalysis, and philosophy has been cited in many newer studies, but neither has approached the critical reputation (and I'm speaking only of the field I know most intimately) afforded to literary theorists like Barthes, Bakhtin, Said, or even Frederic Jameson and Linda Hutcheon.

facets of one's research. Despite its many theoretical and philosophical flaws, a canonical system does have at least one practical advantage: it reduces the need for blind hunts through bibliographies, book stacks and databases because some measure of sorting, however dubious, has already taken place. In the absence of this filtering process, the field takes on a highly idiosyncratic shape and a "study in masculinity" can involve nearly every form of expression: personal reminiscences by newspaper columnists, short stories by psychologists, case studies by psychoanalysts, close readings of comic books by cultural theorists, graphs and charts by sociologists, magazine articles, inspirational tales by self-help groups, literary analyses, philosophical arguments, politically-charged diatribes, as well as several hybrids from the above (and other) categories. The applicability of a lot of this work to an academic study like this one is not always clear. At present, explanations about the nature of Western masculinity tend to obscure the distinctions between, say, a public statement by a celebrity on one hand and clinical or literary study on the other. I make no particular argument for or against the legitimacy of various expressions (although the nature of this study and my own career path do, I'm sure, reveal certain inclinations), but, even taking all statements as valuable, differences in the *mode* of communication and the intended application of a given idea cannot be overlooked. Clearly, masculinity is not a subject that lends itself to strict classification in the way that "Renaissance Literature" or "Cartesian Geometry" might, but, as clearly, there must be some kind of study, some kind of scholarly rigour, if it is to be an academic subject at all.

This returns us to the kinds of problems discussed in the previous section, problems associated with establishing appropriate limits, problems to do with where to draw, and how to defend, or even if we should defend, certain borders. Like the boundary between fiction and reality, the boundary between strictly academic and broader cultural phenomena is not always easily established. The growing pains that have accompanied the growth of various women's studies programs indicate that even the most pervasive foundational similarities and agreements are not safeguards against serious dissent when it comes to the actual implementation of certain ideas and ideals. Universal agreement on the necessity of women's emancipation in the real world has done very little to smooth out the conflicts that arise out of both personal differences and the operational dissimilarities of various fields inside the academic world. Bluntly, agreement about the existence of inequality has not led to any agreement about *how* this inequality is to be addressed.

In many ways, this is as it should be. One of the chief aims of the feminist project has been to demonstrate that women are complex multifarious creatures. The success of this project has led to multifarious and complex forms of expression, many of which are not compatible with each other and this incompatibility has made it difficult to reach consensus and "get things done" as quickly as some might have hoped. These logistical and organizational problems are, no doubt, serious, but they are also manifestations of the enormous scope of women's awareness and testify to falsity of any position which would reduce women to a single, uncomplicated cognitive or social category.



Investigations into the nature of masculinity<sup>15</sup> are occupied with many of the same concerns and troubled by many of the same problems that arise in feminist analyses: the belief that traditional structures of gender are constricting, the need to investigate the contingency of “natural” assumptions, and the inability to anaesthetize the subject matter enough to make it hold still long enough for serious, dispassionate observation. The major difference is in the absence of a clear, galvanizing oppressor. The oppressive presence of patriarchal society has a unifying effect on feminist discourse and creates both an historical continuity and a coherent (if complicated) vision of the future within the movement. The reality of patriarchal oppression gives force and energy to feminist arguments because it allows for an uncomplicated, other-directed indignation focused *away* from women and at the structures and individuals who frustrate their potential. The unifying aspect of such a situation is well-documented, and examples from a variety of fields are readily available. In postcolonial discourses, for example, the continued presence of the colonizer grants a simplicity and unity to the basic position of the colonized, a position summarized in various articulations of “leave us alone.” In such cases, emancipatory discourse works best when the obstacle to emancipation is universally agreed upon; without it, a kind of uncertainty, or even ambivalence, sets in and the inconclusive work of determining the nature of problems replaces the more goal-oriented practice of solving them.

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<sup>15</sup> In this study, I avoid use of the popular term “the Men’s Movement” for a number of reasons. First, given the scattered nature of the discourse, I am not yet certain that men are “moving” at any significant pace toward any significant destination. Second, the gender essentialist assumption of “men” as transparent receptors and propagators of “masculinity” has not been firmly established. Third, and most important, this study seeks to examine masculinity as a story that mediates between the worlds of fiction, reality and myth. In this investigation, the story can travel independently of individual men and, as a result, no strict focus on real men can account for its movement or its various features.

The lack of unity in masculine discourses arises, I think, largely because of the impossibility of other-directed indignation in situations where one is one's own oppressor. Men studying masculinity cannot "take to the streets" or make demands of public officials in a way that follows any existing template for political, intellectual, or social change. When they do, they risk falling into a trap that troubles certain extreme forms of feminist and postcolonial thinking, forms which consider certain types of oppression not as unwanted burdens, but as guarantees of moral and, increasingly, intellectual legitimacy. In her controversial but frequently convincing book *Who Stole Feminism?* Christina Hoff-Sommers bemoans the fact that "rage and anger are a type of qualification" (20-1), while Bart Moore-Gilbert, in his book *Postcolonial Theory*, notes that it is

invidious and distasteful to insist on a kind of beauty parade in which the competitors are made to press their claims to have been the most oppressed colonial subjects [and thereby] to be the most 'truly' postcolonial subjects. (12)

Peter Middleton locates something similar in "the idea of multiple oppression", a type of thinking in which "someone with multiple oppressions could claim a kind of political priority and existential authority over someone with only one oppression" (146). In all of these examples, a history of oppression forms the foundation of and provides the framework for some kind of argument for a new, and presumably superior, type of socio-political or intellectual arrangement.

Without such a history (and often without some visibly verifiable marker of that history) as credential, arguments to rearrange society according to one's own vision are extremely difficult to make. Consider Middleton's description of an academic conference on "Changing Identities" where

The speakers always identified themselves by an oppression. A black speaker was black and not first World. A middle-class man was gay, not middle class. A middle class white southerner [was] a socialist. No one was prepared to speak even in part from components of their identity with oppressor connotations. The speakers clearly felt that there was no other position from which to speak an emancipatory discourse than from one of their *determinate oppressions*. (emphasis mine, 145)

Even though Middleton is careful to point out that "no one was trying to con the audience" (145), it seems obvious that *everyone* was trying to highlight the most politically poignant aspects of his or her identity as a means of securing support for individual arguments. More disturbingly, the speakers seemed to wilfully seek out some type of reductive description of themselves ("I am a black man therefore..." or "As a homosexual I believe...") based on what Middleton calls a "determinate oppression," a term which, in context, seems to refer to something remarkably like a sympathetic stereotype. The deeply problematic nature of this practice has not been well-enough recognized. It should be unthinkable that feminist, postcolonial and queer discourses should *ever* use class, gender, race or sexual orientation as transparent markers of

individual legitimacy; as things are, the use of such criteria is not only condoned, but very nearly required if one is to be taken seriously in certain debates.

The need for an oppressed identity causes serious problems for the study of masculinity because serious investigation can never get anywhere as long as victimization is a necessary prerequisite for the justification of the discourse. Without the unifying factor of some recognizable and external oppressor, masculine research begins in the difficult "phase two" of an emancipatory project. That is, it starts, without any previous momentum, with a stack of troubling details (as opposed to a grand vision) and must work its way back to effective action. Crudely, masculine studies finds itself in the role of the elected,<sup>16</sup> rather than the campaigning, politician. The common feminist refrain that begins with the phrase "If women ran the world..." is simply unavailable to men studying masculinity. In many important respects, men *do* run the world and so, it seems, they have only themselves to blame if they're doing it badly. The fragmented nature and the frequent recriminations that trouble masculine discourses reflect exactly this difficulty. Different visions of masculinity target other visions of masculinity as the root of the problem, or, at other times, different academic disciplines attempt territorial explanations of masculinity in the terms of a single academic subject area.<sup>17</sup> This is of

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<sup>16</sup> I don't mean to suggest that anybody "elected" the patriarchal structure, just to note the problems associated with wielding power are different than the problems of struggling toward it.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Bly, for example, sees "the new, sensitive man" as a shameful kind of self-flagellation, while others, usually sensitive new men, bemoan the kind of manufactured tribalism Bly embodies to them. Psychoanalysts criticize sociology's penchant to view the psyche as a transparent extension of social structures, while sociologists resist the idea that the mind is a coherent subject of study outside the contextual frameworks that enclose it.

course, a kind of horizontal aggression, which, like its feminist counterpart, prevents people from getting to, and solving problems.<sup>18</sup>

For the purposes of this study, the wilds of masculine commentaries can be broken down, at least in an academic capacity, in terms of sociological and psychoanalytic perspectives.<sup>19</sup> The sociological perspective, characterized in terms of "Sex Role Stress" by Joseph Pleck, suggests that "*social approval and situational adaptations*" (134) are at the root of masculine behaviour and that "because of sex role, individuals are socialized to have personality characteristics that are dysfunctional" (134). This view, which is, broadly speaking, compatible with a great deal of feminist and postcolonial thinking, emphasizes the ways in which societies *manufacture* individuals with specific features to serve specific social goals and expectations, and holds that the "role itself causes the problem" (145), not any strictly internal shortcoming or dysfunction in the individual. It sees certain psychologically-based descriptions of Male Sex Role Identity as thinly-veiled rationalizations for maintaining traditional

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<sup>18</sup> Because of the discursive advantages of an oppressed identity, the justifiable masculine claim that men suffer because of masculine structures has sometimes been re-routed into an inappropriate search for some unifying, external oppressor. In an apparent effort to rally the troops and quell infighting, certain masculinist studies come dangerously close to blaming women for men's troubles. The worst of Warren Farrell's work in *The Myth of Male Power* demonstrates this point as he gathers a kind of encyclopaedia of women's crimes to demonstrate the frailty of the masculine position. His point about frailty is, I think, a worthwhile one, but his argumentative strategy gets into some disturbing territory. Similarly, Peter Middleton criticizes the early Men's Magazine *Achilles Heel* for constructing an "explanation for the adult male's behaviour in which it seems as if it were the mother who is to blame somehow for messing up the making of her heroic son" (124).

<sup>19</sup> These approaches to masculinity have, for the most part, been more influential on this study than any strictly literary orientation because, in very many cases, literary analyses of masculinity have focused upon "the 'received' male canon of literature" (Rosen xvii) and emphasized "those 'great' fictions which men have penned as bulwarks against instability, in order to constitute or perfect themselves" (Rosen xvi). These studies, frequently focused on hypermasculine texts, investigate how literature reinforces traditional visions of masculinity, while the novels in this study reveal masculinity as an unstable and troubling construct. This being the case, my research has tended toward analyses of the problematic production of masculinity rather than its promotion through the literary text.

structures. The idea that “normal” men have “innate psychological needs” (4) acts to discourage new forms of expression by classifying unconventional behaviour as aberrant and unnatural behaviour. In times of social change when the traditional *social reasons* for the old order are disappearing, “internalized, psychologically based mechanisms” (159) pick up the slack and reaffirm the link between “normal masculinity” and traditional masculinity. “If holding a job to support a family could no longer be counted on to define manhood, a masculinity/femininity test could” (159). “Traditional roles, even if no longer required by social convention or law, [can instead] be widely perceived as necessary for normal psychological development” (159-160).<sup>20</sup>

The psychoanalytic perspective of masculine behaviour, or, more strictly, masculine subjectivities, has two main strains. “One is the theory that separation from the mother and the absence of the father in early childhood lead to an impoverished emotional development in men, who consequently, lack the skills necessary for intimacy” (Middleton 118). “The other... emerges from the complex arguments of post-structuralism [and sees] masculinity as the effect of the way the relations of language, the unconscious and the patriarchal order as symbolized by the phallus, are structured” (118). The first theory, more compatible with the sociological perspective, is rooted in Nancy Chodorow’s version of object relations theory. It regards the development of a young boy as one where “dependence on his mother, attachment to her, and identification with her represent that which is not masculine: a boy must reject dependence and deny

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<sup>20</sup> The specific methodologies of sex-role testing to which Pleck refers reached their peak in the 1950s and 60s and are no longer considered credible in some circles, but the reality of such testing and such assumptions is significant in establishing the scientific and cultural climate that governed a number of the novels to be addressed in this study.

attachment and identification" (Chodorow 181). The rejection of the mother, coupled with the assumed absence of the father leaves the boy with diminished human emotional attachment and an increased awareness of the demands of masculinity with the result that "[m]asculine gender role training becomes much more rigid than feminine" (181). This theory, like the sociological theory outlined above, places great emphasis on the conscious desires and decisions of the individual and has been criticized for its failure to account for the subconscious in a meaningful way. The same is not true of the second psychoanalytic theory which sees "gender [as] constructed within discourses and their work of representation" (Middleton 132). In this view, gender "is constructed and represented within society's discourses" (Middleton 135) in such a way that the entire *idea* of gender is so bound up with several other representational constructions of "reality" that most of the really important factors in the process of "taking up a position in the system of sexual difference [are] not determined by internal factors" (Middleton 135) like choices.

Middleton's own position, the most thoughtful I have encountered, departs considerably from the theories he so skilfully summarizes and is based on an argument for the rationality of emotion, and the need to recognize emotion as a functioning part of "sensible" male behaviour. His argumentative strategy is much more rigorous than the usual "We have to get to know ourselves and open up" account, and seeks to address the failure of earlier studies to strike a balance between internal and external emphases. Efforts to think of masculinity in terms of either the authenticity of emotion or the universality of " 'supersubjects' such as power and language" (7) fail to account for

interconnections between the interior world of the subject and the exterior world of society in general.<sup>21</sup> Instead, he believes “emotions are a language, a space for interaction, and yet still bodily and personal” (202).

His two central tropes for demonstrating this position are borrowed. The first, taken from Alasdair MacIntyre, believes that “the state of modern moral thought is similar to what might be the state of science after a [major] disaster... [a state] in which only incoherent fragments of thought survive[] (167). The suggestion is that emotion *does* fit inside a coherent system of rationality, but, for various reasons (most of which are unacknowledged or unexamined), very few people have access to this system in the current context. Middleton dubs this “the lost language of emotion” (166), a discursive framework which works well if used properly but which makes no sense when employed in an isolated and fragmentary manner. The widespread belief that emotion is, almost by definition, irrational results from an incomplete understanding of both rationality and emotion. They appear as isolated and unrelated ideas only because we’ve lost the framework which establishes the relationship. Crudely, we’ve been trying to do chemistry with only half the periodic table, and the experiments we’ve been doing (and the conclusions we draw from them) reflect the incompleteness of our awareness. Under

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<sup>21</sup> Middleton credits John Smith with the term “supersubject,” by which he means to describe those subjects which seem to enclose (and render obsolete) other smaller fields. If *everything* is a function of language, then only the study of language matters and individuality becomes just another bewitchment of linguistic structures. Middleton suggests that we need to escape both the “implicitly transcendental model of the subject” (152) (models which see every individual case as a transparent representation of a larger supersubject or superstructure) and the idea that “feelings and emotions are ... primary expressions of the given fixed self of the individual” (130) (that the “real self” is totally autonomous and capable of unfiltered expression). That is, we need to escape those models which view individuality only in terms of its position in some supersubject., and those models which think of emotion as transparent, and, *a priori*, legitimate expressions of an autonomous inner reality.



Middleton's framework, emotion is a part of reason, and, if emotion is a rational concept it should also be educable. An emotional education would, it seems, bring us out of the dark ages and allow us to recognize certain fears and assumptions as not just unpleasant or unjust, but downright irrational. We could escape the "arrested development [and] manipulated underdevelopment" (Middleton 190) that currently limits us.<sup>22</sup>

This type of education would give us, all of us, the skills and the awareness necessary to perform tasks and perceive the world in new and more productive ways. It would, to use Middleton's second borrowed metaphor, aid in the process of "emotional housekeeping." It would allow us to do "emotional labour" with a higher degree of efficiency and a lower degree of delusion. Agnes Heller uses the term "emotional housekeeping" in her book, *A Theory of Feelings*, to refer to the dual processes by which culture at large can "determine the 'frame,' or... area of movement" (199) in which one operates while still maintaining the need for the individual to "keep in order his 'emotional household'" (199). This metaphor is provocative because it maintains both the social and private operations of feelings while simultaneously situating them squarely in the field of "work," of things that *need* to be done.<sup>23</sup> Emotional work is necessary if we are to keep our own private spaces in order and the degree to which we maintain order

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<sup>22</sup> Focusing on intended results rather than concrete plans, Middleton is less than specific about the exact form his emotional education would take, but, inasmuch as he provides a model at all, he suggests one which disrupts current approaches to masculine emotion which, he says, involve the "cultivated occlusion of self-reflection" (190). Emotional education would emphasize emotion as a viable cognitive framework and investigate the kind of "rationality [that is] specific to emotion" (189). This would, in a sense, bring emotion "out of the closet" that currently encloses it, and place it in a more workable position away from notions of it as either "a dangerous dog that evokes fear" (189), or as women's "magic" (190).

<sup>23</sup> Heller also invokes a kind of gendered spectre when she uses housekeeping, traditionally considered "women's work," as a metaphor for the kinds of difficult, necessary work that, while largely unacknowledged, tend to mark the distinction between an ordered and a chaotic existence.

in these spaces influences our ability to function “outside the house,” in the wider cultural frame, just as the wider cultural frame influences the dimensions and properties of the house itself.<sup>24</sup>

In some ways, I suppose this is just a dressed up way of dealing with the “nature/nurture” debate, a way of accounting for both private and public factors in the formation of both the individual and his/her wider culture. Even if this is so, however, the particularities of this account have specific relevance to this study, emphasizing as they do the fluid nature of the border between “internal” emotional phenomena and “external” social and political frameworks. “The lost language of emotion” and the idea of “emotional housekeeping” exist on the nexus between macrocosmic sociological explanations of masculinity and microcosmic psychoanalytical ones. They take the sociologically (and socially) verifiable truth that, as Jeff Hearn has said, “men are constructed through public visibility” (3) and place it up against Peter Schwenger’s recognition that “self-consciousness undermines the masculine assertion” (14). That is, they take the neighbourhood (represented through public visibility) to be a consequence of what goes on inside the house (represented by self-consciousness) and they show the state of the house to be influenced by the neighbourhood that surrounds it.

For this literary analysis of particular fictional characters, the above metaphor is particularly apt because the unique perspective of literary narration allows for a similar

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<sup>24</sup> One of the key advantages of Heller’s metaphor is that it imagines the relation between interior and exterior realities in a structural, specific manner. Because it imagines the emotional house as a concrete thing, the difficulties attached to building new additions, fixing the plumbing etc. become recognizable as what they are, mammoth and life-altering tasks that cannot usually be undertaken in isolation. Our houses exist in relation to adjacent lots and our renovations require outside help. Even more crudely, the state of the neighbours’ properties affects the value of our own.

emphasis on the intersection between internal and external events. Without all the white noise that troubles real world psychoanalysis, narrowly stipulated literary worlds, rendered through (at least partially) controlled narrative voices, can construct coherent, reliable, and fairly direct relationships between the outer and inner realities they stipulate and perceive. This study seeks to investigate this intersection in terms of the pervasive presence of masculine stories in the lives of a particular collection of characters. Unskilled in the art of emotional and psychological housekeeping, the characters in this study are unable to establish and maintain functioning households. They lack what the psychologist Roger Horrocks has called "inner space" (40), a space that roughly corresponds to Heller's emotional household. Their inability to manage this space leads to a situation where they are, psychologically speaking, sleeping in the streets, such that the dominant myths of the larger culture are unfiltered through any more private structure.<sup>25</sup>

In *Writing Men*, Berthold Schoene-Harwood notes the way that masculinity "debilitates individualism" (xii) and says that "a state of acute paranoia" (xii) results when the individual identifies too readily with "the impossible phantasmatic ideal" (xii) that is the masculine mythos. For the characters in these novels, the result of this process is an inability to distinguish between real, fictional and mythic constructions (most particularly the construction of manhood) and a tendency to use mythification to stabilize an otherwise chaotic world. That is, they take certain stories, particularly stories about

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<sup>25</sup> It is not, perhaps, incidental that houses play such a key role in many of the novels in this study. In *Unconditional Surrender*, *Moses Ascending*, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and *Foe* a character's orientation toward a particular house (or shelter) is routinely used to indicate something significant about the state of his or her psyche.

the nature of masculinity and the male role, and use them to construct some kind of mythic foundation for their lives, such that imaginary stories start to operate as paradigms of truth. So, while Peter F. Murphy's belief that "masculinity... is a fictional construction" (1) is undoubtedly true in a number of important ways, masculinity is in fact in a special class of fictional constructions, a class which possesses the ability "to leave the fictional mode and cross the threshold of actuality" (Pavel 60). The result is a complex intermingling of ontological levels whereby the characters attempt to calibrate themselves in the actual world by using fictional constructions, fictional constructions which, for them, possess the world-shaping capabilities of myths.

### **Turf Wars: Postcolonial Criticism and Theory and the Mapping of Textual Territories<sup>26</sup>**

Of course, the idea that fictional constructions can turn into world-shaping actualities is at the root of many postcolonial discourses and informs the postcolonial dimension of this study. The legacy of colonial occupation demonstrates just how readily a work of fiction (a made-up set of assumptions) can become a political reality, while the struggles to "de-colonize" individual and collective consciousnesses demonstrate that the difficulties encountered when we fight stories can be every bit as formidable as those we encounter when we fight in more concrete and direct fashions. The title of Ashis

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<sup>26</sup> As Leela Gandhi notes, "semantic quibbling...haunts attempts to name postcolonial terminology" (3). The presence or absence of the hyphen in the word postcolonial is the subject of some controversy, controversy that cannot always be avoided. I attempt to avoid the issue here as it has not directly influenced any of the positions or arguments in this dissertation. In this study I use the unhyphenated construction as a matter of stylistic choice, but without reference to its political implications vis-a-vis "post-colonialism"

Nandy's influential study, *The Intimate Enemy*, makes explicit the conflicted nature of any struggle against deeply internalized, intimate, structures of thought:

[O]uter incentives and dis-incentives are invariably noticed and challenged; they become the overt indicators of oppression and dominance. More dangerous and permanent are the inner rewards and punishments, the secondary psychological gains and losses from suffering under submission under colonialism. (Nandy 3)

What this suggests, I think, is that the postcolonial situation, at least in terms of its psychological aspects, can get mired in the same swamp that troubles discourses about masculinity. The greater severity of the "inner" crises is directly linked to the fact that interior problems cannot be as readily "noticed and challenged" because there is no clear differentiation between the mechanism for, and the subject of, the challenge. Having installed itself directly into the worldview of its victim, Nandy's intimate enemy can no longer be fought with any straightforward oppositional strategy since, in a really significant way, one can no longer defeat the external enemy without, in some fashion, destroying the subject of liberation. As a result, the subject is left with a swampland of deflected apprehensions and skewed self-analyses which is the direct result of the intermingling of the colonizer's story of things and the subject's own perception of his or her reality.

Because of these complications, this study sees postcolonial discourse as “preoccupied principally with [the] analysis of cultural forms” (Moore-Gilbert 12)<sup>27</sup> rather than as a strictly delineated political investigation into the histories of certain historically colonized states. With Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, I view both the practice and the legacy of imperialism “as a process rather than a [strict] structure” (213). The advantage of flexible terms like “cultural forms” and “process” is, I think, fairly obvious inasmuch as such terms allow for both a broad and a more specific view of phenomena which constitute both individually nuanced and large-scale cultural events. To keep with the familiar metaphor, these terms recognize the contested and porous borders between interior and exterior realities, and allow for a view of postcolonialism that extends beyond the narrow, rigidly defended confines which threaten to reduce, or at least ghettoize, the discourse into a static itemization of well-founded complaints.<sup>28</sup>

Against such an approach, I propose a broader view, which, to return to another favourite metaphor, recognizes both the emotional house and the cultural neighbourhood. In this view, a colonial state, broadly considered, is any state which makes it impossible for the individual to engage in those cultural practices which he or she finds necessary for emotional and psychological survival. This idea is strongly influenced by the work of Frantz Fanon, particularly his work in, and writing about, Tunisia, where he founded, with Charles Geronimi, a day hospital for the treatment of mental disorders in the “native

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<sup>27</sup> Understandably, Moore-Gilbert believes that postcolonialism’s dominant cultural forms consist of works which “mediate, challenge or reflect the relations of domination and subordination... between (and often within) nations, races or cultures, which characteristically have their roots in the history of modern European colonialism and imperialism” (12).

<sup>28</sup> In *Colonial Desire*, Robert Young notes that “colonial-discourse analysis as a general method and practice has reached a stage where it is itself in danger of becoming oddly stagnated, and as reified in its approach... as the colonial discourse it studies” (164).

population.” The crux of the hospital’s strategy was to take the patient away from the psychologically crippling colonial presence and establish, within the walls of the hospital, a kind of micro-society “with its own multiplicity of relations, duties, and possibilities so that patients can assume roles and fulfill functions” (715) that the patients found rewarding and necessary. This would, in turn, allow them to “confront reality on a new register” (718). Fanon’s strategy was, in effect, a real-life precursor to Heller’s metaphor. Withdrawing from the colonial presence allows for more direct investigation into the tasks necessary to keep each individual’s mental and emotional house in order. In this construction, the opportunity to engage in individually-directed tasks is a kind of therapy and a mode of resistance against the broader cultural trends, which, Fanon believed, contributed to the individual’s paranoia and instability.

The absence of such a hospital, or even such a metaphor,<sup>29</sup> is at the root of much of the suffering the reader encounters when reading the novels in this study. The “phantasms” (Fanon and Geronimi 718) Fanon sees in terms of the concrete presence of colonial society are also, in varying degrees, the result of more ethereal presences which are confronted *inside* the individual’s consciousness and in the form of narrative constructions. In this study, the difficulty of grasping, let alone attending to, “the multiplicity of relations” inside oneself, the disarray of the household, is almost always based in some combination of the narrative and temporal features outlined above.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> As I’ve been trying to suggest, the line between a metaphor and a concrete structure is often fuzzy and it’s not always clear whether physical spaces are creating mental spaces or whether mental spaces are creating physical ones.

<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that Fanon himself has been criticized, by Jock MacColloch and Françoise Vergès among others, for assuming “alienation was entirely the result of social, cultural, and political conditions”

One of the most significant, and perhaps upsetting, outcroppings of this view of postcolonial discourse is that it allows for a view of colonialism that is not directly tied to hierarchical power structures or historical subordination. By viewing colonialism in terms of cultural practices, the critic can begin to think of the colonial subject in terms of individuals who are not, in the usual sense, marginal. Such a conception takes Moore-Gilbert's supposition that "postcolonial criticism can... legitimately be applied to any number of different contexts" (12) and extends it to its logical conclusion, a conclusion which, as Nicholas Thomas suggests, might in its worst cases impose rather than expose "the false universality and hegemony of imperial expansion" (x). The seemingly a-political nature of such a stance is worrisome to Thomas and other postcolonial critics because it might imply a lack of political commitment and a desire to return to the universalized world of critics whom Barbara Christian describes as "neutral humanists" (457), critics who feel qualified to evaluate the entire world from a single critical and cultural perspective.<sup>31</sup> The result of such a position is a kind of figurative colonialism where, as Kwaku Larbi Korang has suggested, a single, "generalized episteme [is used] to claim large territories of the globe for the sphere of its intellectual operations" (181).<sup>32</sup>

There is a degree to which such a critique might be considered true, and it seems obvious that some of the things I suggest in this study will be upsetting to practitioners

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(Vergès 95). Obviously, this study does not follow Fanon into these territories and posits a much more complex relationship between inner and outer realities.

<sup>31</sup> In her book *Postcolonial Theory*, Leela Gandhi notes "postcolonialism's vexed relationship with humanism" (28), a relationship which, from a Marxist-Humanist perspective envisions a "universal consensus between responsible individuals with regard to the conceptualisation of a humane, progressive and just social order" (27), and which, from an anti-humanist post-structuralist position, sees the desire for universality and "consensus [as] vitiated by a 'conversational imperialism'" (28).

<sup>32</sup> Korang credits Stephen Slemon's article, "Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World" as the source of this idea.



of what might be called “canonical postcolonialism,” postcolonial criticism practiced in its most traditional ways. The broader application of the postcolonial framework does, I think, include hitherto unexplored territories, and, in its most aggravated cases, makes claims for works and authors who might superficially seem antithetical to the postcolonial project. But this need not be framed in the negative terms of Korang’s “threat of domestication” (180); it might just as easily be seen as refusing a particular critical ghetto. More importantly, a movement toward a broad view of postcolonialism is a move against the “generalized episteme” that currently troubles the discourse, an episteme which, in its worst manifestations, views individuals and entire cultures exclusively in terms of their determinant oppressions. Far from arguing for a kind of bland domestication, this study points toward a postcolonial discourse which recognizes the complexity and diversity of postcolonial culture and art, one which views individual *differences* as the desirable result of individual sovereignty, a sovereignty which cannot be recognized through an exclusively macrocosmic political lens.

With this in mind, this study’s most controversial assertion (the assertion that Evelyn Waugh is the author of postcolonial works), is not designed to be inflammatory or retrograde, just to emphasize Korang’s own point that “the colonial experience is a differential, many-sided phenomenon that does not carry the same charge or lend itself to the same uses in every location” (184).<sup>33</sup> In the case of Waugh’s characters, the distinct location is that of the dispossessed English gentry, the “Old World” gentleman caught in

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<sup>33</sup> In some passages, this is the kind of critical practice Said advocates in *Culture and Imperialism*, one which Moore-Gilbert skilfully summarizes in terms of some kind of “stress on the links rather than the divisions between cultures, for instance [on] opening ‘dialogues’ between the Western canon and non-metropolitan production” (64). In Said’s case, this involves considering Camus in terms of Algeria and Yeats in terms of Césaire. In this study, Waugh is considered in terms outlined by Fanon.

the historical transition from an England derived from his own cultural traditions and a "new England" which regards his values and beliefs as empty and obsolete. The specific "charge" of such a situation is surely less aggravated than the more brutish forms of cultural occupation practised by the English Gentleman in other parts of the world, but the sense of crisis that arises from the sudden eradication of established (and cherished) cultural frameworks is similar in both cases.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the cultural hegemony of a "new" worldview over a pre-existent set of cultural practices (in a specific space) is, almost by definition, a kind of colonial occupation to those who find themselves on the wrong side of the divide. And, no matter what we think of the value(s) of the old order, we must recognize the situation, in some "more or less" fashion, as colonial in terms of its effects on the individual's awareness.<sup>35</sup>

This more inclusive approach to postcolonial works also extends into an argument for a more multi-faceted type of postcolonial criticism. In particular, this study argues for a more considered and complex reading of particular postcolonial texts. My treatment of Selvon, Marshall and Coetzee emphasizes not just the peculiar intersection between story and masculinity, but also, and to varying degrees, the inadequacies of the current critical

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<sup>34</sup> This said, this study makes no attempt to analyse the justness of various cultural occupations, just to examine the kinds of crises they tend to cause. Clearly, the kind of "colonization by democracy" that Waugh's characters endure is not the same thing as the forced military and economic occupations experienced in the Second and Third World. I do not suggest that the former is in any way the equal of the latter, just that the *processes* which produce psychological and emotional instability might be similar in both cases.

<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the perhaps distasteful nature of the worldview Waugh posits is important because it emphasizes one of the potential contradictions in the conflation between emancipatory and oppositional politics. If the moral basis of postcolonial criticism rests on the necessity of cultural sensitivity, then we cannot simply withhold sympathy from cultures we don't like. Whatever we think of Right-wing ideologues, racists and homophobes, we must acknowledge their humanity and the existence of their own distinct cultural climates (or else risk visiting upon them the exact practices for which they earned our disrespect and censure). Whenever we begin to regard whole groups of people (and entire sets of cultural practices) as simple, one-dimensional impediments to our own political ends, we re-institute the colonial process.

approaches to their individual novels. More specifically, this treatment links these critical shortcomings with the ideological preoccupations of certain types of postcolonial criticism, the types which takes racial, political, social and economic hardship to be the only salient, and *a priori* the most important features in *all* postcolonial texts. Such approaches cannot, I think, be left unexamined; this study attempts to examine some of these problems through a consideration of the disjunctions between the fictional world posited by the individual novels, and the critical responses articulated by individual critics. In many cases, the novels are treated as little more than “test cases” for the socio-political suppositions of the critics. In some cases, the novels seem to be overlooked altogether. This amounts to a kind of critical plundering which ignores and destroys the idiosyncrasies of individual fictional worlds because of an overdeveloped and underconsidered need to view every text (provided its author fits into one of the established demographic groups) in terms of the dominant preoccupations of the cognitive framework that is postcolonial criticism.

This is true of writers as widely dissimilar as Selvon, Marshall, and Coetzee. Selvon’s slight critical oeuvre, Marshall’s moderate one, and the critical industry that has sprung up around Coetzee all reflect, in different ways, the degree to which literary legitimacy has been tied to a narrow kind of critical topicality. A comparatively “minor” writer in terms of critical mass, Selvon (largely through the continued popularity of *The Lonely Londoners*) remains a favourite of many readers, postcolonial and otherwise.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Obviously, there are logical, perhaps even moral, difficulties inherent in the postcolonial critic’s attempt to rank and classify writers as “major” or “minor.” It seems a bit backwards to evaluate postcolonial writers relative to their places in some First World hierarchy established by publishing contracts, book sales and university syllabi. (Can a critic interested in postcolonial thought really use a writer’s relationship with

The lack of critical interest, and the generally low quality of the criticism that does exist, do not, I think, reflect a lack of literary merit so much as a lack of critical applicability. Described by Wayne Brown as "the least racially distressed writer of his generation" (35), Selvon seems somehow to have suffered from this *lack* of distress. Ill-fitted for the kind of socio-political explications that constitute a significant portion of postcolonial criticism, Selvon's works have generally been ignored and, when addressed, they have, in many cases, been inappropriately used in relation to such explications. The ironic result is that the very idiosyncratic factors that make Selvon unique and good, make him critically problematic; so far, there has been no sustained effort to rectify, or even recognize, the problem.

Something similar happens to Marshall inasmuch as some of the really valuable aspects of her work have been overlooked and/or commandeered by conventional critical approaches, approaches which identify her fictional world too readily and too exclusively with certain determinant oppressions. These critical approaches seem to use the preoccupations of particular discourses to pre-select the important aspects of Marshall's work; as a result, they fail to recognize some pretty clear, if unconventional, signals coming from the text itself. Those parts of Marshall's work which do not correspond *exactly* to some recognizable political position relative to race and gender issues (often

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Penguin, Faber and Faber, or even Heinemann, as concrete evidence of legitimacy?) For the purposes of this study, it is important just to note the fact that each writer's critical reputation reflects some aspect of, usually some limitation in, current critical practices.

the very parts that make her fictional world as seductive and powerful as it is) have, in the main, been under- or ill-considered.<sup>37</sup>

The small-scale critical problems which trouble the work on Selvon and Marshall are reconfigured in the more substantial and higher profile volume of criticism on Coetzee. Inasmuch as Selvon's critical heritage seems to have suffered from a lack of critical topicality, Coetzee's critical reputation seems to have benefited from his position inside a complex web of political, critical, and theoretical discourses. A writer with both clear post-structural affinities and with clear political resonance, Coetzee seems to have specifically located, if not specifically bridged, the gap between some significant, but frequently divergent, critical practices. Consequently, Dominic Head believes that "Coetzee's importance... stems from his specificity as post-colonizer" (19), while Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson believe that "academe would have invented J.M. Coetzee had he not already existed, so sympathetic do his concerns seem to be to critical theory" (6). The result has been a widespread critical debate (involving, among many others, heavyweights such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Helen Tiffin, and Linda Hutcheon) in which Coetzee's political relevance (or lack thereof) has been pitted against his theoretical significance. This debate has been a fruitful one, but one which, nonetheless, remains too rigidly structured around the preoccupations of individual critical discourses, rather than individual fictional realities. It frequently seems interested

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<sup>37</sup> Indeed, a great deal of the criticism on Marshall appears in specifically ideological publications like *Race, Gender and Class*, *PALARA* (*The Publication of the Afro-Latin Research Association*), and *MELUS* (*The Journal for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*). Such publications are obviously important and the work they do is undoubtedly significant, but, as vehicles for the critical exploration of fictional worlds, they are somewhat limited by their expressed preoccupations with the politics of the really real world.

in how the books illuminate the discourse rather than how the discourse illuminates the books.<sup>38</sup> Crudely, this debate is concerned with *where* to situate Coetzee in terms of discourse, not *what* exactly each novel has to offer as a distinct story world. In much of the high profile work on Coetzee, the too specific search for theory and/or political allegory in the novels obscures the signals of the novels themselves; this demonstrates the degree to which critical discourse can become its own kind of grand narrative, a coercive structure which compromises the autonomy of individual and idiosyncratic stories in an attempt to consider *all* stories in terms of some overriding and epic preoccupations.

My critique of such practices often amounts to little other than straightforward literary analysis, an attempt to really engage with the topography of individual texts and to determine some of the significant operational forces inside each particular fictional frame. I do not think such a strategy is without political ramifications and I do not accept that such a strategy signals a return to "neutral humanism." Quite the opposite, this kind of postcolonial criticism, by the sheer heterogeneity of its practices, demonstrates the uniqueness and complexity of non-European, non-white, and non-male works. It denies a reductive approach to new literatures by acknowledging and allowing for *individual* talents and idiosyncratic aesthetic principles, principles that are not transparently located inside (although they can be violated by an overdeveloped preoccupation with) larger political and social identities. Crudely, such an approach affords *full*, rather than partial,

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<sup>38</sup> This is particularly evident insofar as *Foe*, a novel which received only moderate reviews upon publication, has become the most popular of Coetzee's books among critics. Among Coetzee's least regarded works in terms of "literary" awards and honours, *Foe*'s critical reputation seems to depend, at least partially, on the depth of its critical applications, on its tendency to give critics (like myself) a lot of work to do.

creative potentialities to postcolonial writers and seeks to discover, rather than impose, the essential nature of various fictional worlds.<sup>39</sup>

### **Framing the Frameworks: Notes on Individual Chapters And Critical Significance**

In all this talk of the importance of individual emotional and psychological households, it would be foolish to suggest that everybody perceives and handles this problem in an identical fashion. There is, in fact, a great deal of variance in the way people approach both masculinity and the intersection between story and reality. The novelists and the novels selected for this study reflect this variety. They represent a number of different determinate positions with respect to class, race, education, geography, and chronology, and display a great variety of less determinant factors to do with aesthetic, philosophical and political orientation. None, I think, could be easily confused with any of the others. The far flung, and seemingly idiosyncratic selection of subject(s) is entirely intentional and is meant to suggest, in some incomplete fashion, both the pervasiveness and the malleability of stories about masculinity. In this study, the wildly dissimilar fictional projects of Waugh, Selvon, Marshall and Coetzee are

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<sup>39</sup> Such an approach, perhaps, places greater emphasis on individual autonomy than it does on collective political movement, and, as far as works of art are concerned, privileges complex constructions over straightforward manifestoes, but this should not compromise the progressive nature of the project. It just highlights the potential for paradox in postcolonial thought, a paradox that arises when emancipatory political projects begin to ignore and/or police individual expressions that they deem to be superfluous or unproductive. For some postcolonial critics, the value of the imagination is still very much in doubt. Indeed, a great deal of the critical work surrounding Coetzee's novels clusters around the ethical and political implications of treating literature *as literature*. Again and again, his critics return to questions regarding the proper jurisdiction and the proper subject matter of the imagination, given the author's demographic and political identities.

configured around some common preoccupations with the role of stories in the framing of masculine consciousness.<sup>40</sup>

On some quite obvious level, the dissimilarities between the writers and their projects threaten to undermine the structural integrity of this study because the interconnections between the writers do not lend themselves to many of the more popular discursive frameworks. But, at a more significant argumentative level, breaking this discussion up into white or non-white, comic or tragic, modern or postmodern, or even male or female perspectives seems to betray some of the basic premises of this study: the idea that borders are fuzzy and fluid, and the idea that "supersubjects," all-encompassing totalities, do a dangerous disservice to individual perspectives. Throughout this study I will suggest that the particular value of each writer's work is *not* located exclusively in any of his or her recognizable determinant positions, however much those positions influence the production of the work. To return to the tiring metaphor, it is the peculiar nature of each novelist's intellectual and emotional house and the idiosyncratic style of housekeeping that accounts for the individually distinct, though socially recognizable, story worlds.

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<sup>40</sup> In fact, one of the most important similarities between these writers, as far as masculine discourses are concerned, is the degree to which they posit unconventional types of masculinity in their work. Most studies of the literary representations of masculinity place emphasis on texts which tend to encode, rather than contest, some aspects of epic masculinity: David Rosen's *The Changing Fictions of Masculinity* focuses on "The Armor of the Man-Monster in *Beowulf*" and "Inventing Primal Masculinity" in *Sons and Lovers* (and other texts); Peter Schwenger's *Phallic Critiques* deals extensively with Hemingway and Mailer, and Berthold Schoene-Harwood's *Writing Men* deals with representations of masculine violence in *A Clockwork Orange* and *Lord of the Flies*. While such studies might not reflect the *totality* of the work being done with literary masculinity, they do establish, in some basic sense, the general emphasis of the discourse up to this point. No such emphasis exists in this study, where masculinity is generally regarded, by the writer if not the characters, as a problematic construct rather than an epic achievement.



Still, if post-structuralism has alerted us to anything, it is that an awareness of the inappropriateness of existing orders does not, by itself, eliminate the need for some kind of order. However uncertain we are about the value of any particular structure, randomness is not, in the end, preferable. To this end, I have chosen as straightforward a structure as possible, treating each author in a distinct chapter, beginning with the oldest work (*Men at Arms* 1952) and moving towards the newest (*The Master of Petersburg* 1994).<sup>41</sup> This chronological strategy has some productive consequences for the argumentative coherence of the study. The first two chapters, on Waugh and on Selvon, focus upon rootless, single men attempting to "make it" without the stabilizing masculine assurances of a wife, family or career, while the final two chapters, on Marshall and on Coetzee, deal quite specifically with the nature of paternity and fatherhood, and with delineation between masculine and feminine expectations.<sup>42</sup> Spatially, the study moves from an old-world colonial centre (London), to a new world centre (New York), and then out to the margins, most directly embodied in Coetzee's use of Defoe's desert island. In every case, the primary characters rely heavily on some sort of narrative structure to give shape to and to calibrate their lives.

Perhaps most significantly, this dissertation's structure reveals a gradual movement away from basically realistic comic works and toward a direct and haunting investigation of the borders between story and reality. The force of dreams and visions gradually increases in each successive chapter. In Waugh's work, most of the really good

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<sup>41</sup> Thus, Chapter One focuses on Waugh, Chapter Two on Selvon, Chapter Three on Marshall, and Chapter Four on Coetzee.

<sup>42</sup> In Marshall's case, the focus is on the nature of marriage and the roles of husband and wife: in Coetzee's, marriage is replaced with less stable and more metaphysical investigations into the topsy-turvy power relations between fathers and mothers, and fathers and sons.

jokes are rooted in the strict juxtaposition between Guy's imaginary vision of the war (as represented in the stories of Captain Truslove), and the actual war, the war he concretely experiences. Near the end of Selvon's *Moses* trilogy, such comic juxtapositions give way to an increasing sense of anxiety, poignantly punctuated by Moses' inability to distinguish between waking and dreaming states and by the presence of at least one ghost. In Marshall's work, the actual world loses even more of its concreteness and characters such as Deighton Boyce and Avey Johnson are threatened with (and, in various degrees succumb to) a kind of self dissolution, a dissolution provoked by the force of the stories they have so deeply internalized. In Coetzee's relentlessly humourless world, delineation between actual and story worlds becomes impossible and his characters are haunted by ghosts and visions, visitors from fictional worlds who undermine any sense of certainty or clarity in the actual world. In terms of this study, this kind of argumentative progression establishes the general nature of story's power in terms of the realism of the first chapter(s), and then moves toward a more abstract investigation of its potential in the surrealism of the final section.<sup>43</sup> Obviously, different chapters will deal with the different aspects of this study in different ways and with varying degrees of emphasis. The first and third chapters, because they establish some of the basic conditions of the single and the married man respectively, tend to foreground the specifically masculine side of masculine storylines. The second and fourth chapters, because they deal specifically with the struggle to produce and the

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<sup>43</sup> This is not to suggest that the first chapters are without their surreal elements. Clearly, Waugh, Selvon and Marshall create deranged and unstable realities that constantly threaten their characters. The above distinction is intended only to emphasize the distinction between story's *metaphorical* presence inside the minds and hearts of characters, and the *concrete* presence of fictional characters in the day-to-day operations of some of Coetzee's characters.

dangers of consuming texts, tend to devote a good deal of energy to the investigation of “story proper,” not just masculine fictions and stories in particular. The specific nuances of the individual texts also require specific attention and, in keeping with the general theme of this introduction, the borders between the micro and the macrocosmic aims of this project are not always simple and easy to draw.

Still, I think that acknowledging nuance and accepting the limits of “supersubject” critical frameworks will be essential if we are to preserve the integrity of critical practice in general, and literary analysis in particular. The assumption that certain critical approaches know in advance the nature and the significance of individual story worlds undermines the essentially exploratory nature of reading as means of discovering and experiencing *possible*, rather than pre-existent, worlds. As already suggested, the trans-world shift into fictional worlds cannot take place if the reader is too preoccupied with the processes of another world. This is true even if the “other world” is itself a discursive construct, a set of critical suppositions. When the other world gains a certain amount of ontological priority over the fictional world, when the dominant signals of the discourse override the dominant signals of the story, it becomes difficult really to discover the nature of the story world and, when this is so, we are no longer reading in any really important sense. In this study, I have attempted to read in an important sense, to follow specific signals and make the shift into specifically stipulated fictional worlds. This process necessarily leads into unconventional areas, often into areas which create serious problems for established discursive practices. This is as it must be, and, as serious literary critics, we must be prepared to journey into these areas if our work is to have

meaning and value. This study, complete with the difficulties it ushers in, might serve as an example of just such an eclectic journey.

The fictional worlds I have selected for study here have all, in different degrees and different fashions, proved more subtle and complex than the many established critical practices used to explicate them; that does not mean we should give up on these books or books like them. Instead, we need to modify our approaches to them so that we are better able to handle and process a wider variety of unusual and evocative story worlds. At the very least, we should not duplicate the shortcomings of the masculine characters in these texts. We should not allow our preoccupations with grand narratives and epic generalities to disrupt and diminish our ability to experience subtle and important signals that can enrich and expand our understanding of what it is to be human and alive. As a study of stories inside stories, this project emphasizes the dangers that arise out of a confusion between primary and secondary universes. It illustrates that an overdeveloped interest in "the big picture" undermines the individual's ability to perceive important specifics. In taking such an approach, this study argues for closer attention to the signals of primary universes, for increased attention to the "ground level" of things. This is true for both the "real" life that underlies the epic narrative projections of characters inside particular texts, and for the "primary source" of the literary text itself, insofar as it underlies (or should underlie) some more pervasive critical framework. Again and again, the novels in this study demonstrate that epic visions compromise productive individual experience: as literary critics, we should be investigating the implications, not broadening the applications, of these kinds of dangerous, all-encompassing generalities.

## **Chapter One**

### **Evelyn Waugh: War Stories, Heroic Masculinity, and the Marginal Gentleman**

Be warned. A number of the facts and statements in this chapter are not particularly new. Anyone who has read even one of Evelyn Waugh's novels will have already recognized a number of the stylistic and thematic preoccupations of Waugh's fiction that I will be addressing here. For instance, several critics have noted, with varying degrees of distaste, his consistent emphasis on the English upper classes, his primary interest in male characters (and hence cursory interest in female characters), and his sense that "the modern world" was a wildly unstable entity that had been, in some essential way, detached from any notion of truth or reason.

These features in his fiction, as well as the cantankerous public persona he so carefully maintained, have made him into something of a whipping boy for the enlightened readers and critics of the last several years. As a ready-made poster boy for "the old boy's club," his fiction has been variously attacked and/or ignored by what some have called the young girl's club (and their various satellite communities), and assessments of Waugh as the only first rate comedic genius of the Twentieth Century have given way to those where he is viewed as a fat, small-minded, backward-gazing snob hiding out in some manicured country seat, trying to protect himself against such sinister contemporary evils as democracy, religious equality, unions, women's rights and other similar terrors.

Be warned also, then, that this chapter intends to situate Waugh squarely inside the "progressive" discourse of postcolonial criticism. This, I think, is particularly new. Superficially, such a position might seem untenable, especially since I take no particular

exception to the *content* of the objections outlined above. There is no attempt to rehabilitate the value of Waugh's politics by spiriting his concerns into a sympathetic discourse, no effort to sneak him into postcolonial criticism inside the literary equivalent of a Trojan Horse. Quite the opposite, this study seeks to examine the nature of Troy more than the nature of the horse. In this conception, the walls around postcolonial discourse, not the enemies inside them, receive the bulk of the attention. Such attention is intended to resist a "concept of the 'post-colonial' which is remarkably purist and absolutist in tenor" (Slemon 106).

In his persuasive response to Frederic Jameson, Aijaz Ahmad rejects Jameson's claim that "all third-world texts are necessarily... to be read as... national allegories," because such a position reduces and obscures the complexity of Third World literatures. Ahmad recognizes that, if one views millions of people exclusively through "the unitary 'experience' of national oppression... what else *can* one [or many] narrate but that national oppression?" (79). His point is that a limited view, constructed around a single historical and political reality, cannot possibly account for the complexity of, let alone help, disadvantaged peoples. In place of this macrostructural view of the world in terms of nations, Ahmad posits the unusual "proposition that we live not in three worlds but in one" (80)<sup>1</sup>, a proposition that allows us "to replace the idea of the 'nation' with the larger, less restrictive idea of 'collectivity'" (82), where "collectivities" are constituted by some basic similarity in terms of things like "class, gender, caste, religious community, trade

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<sup>1</sup> I say unusual because, in postcolonial criticism the supposition of one world has been closely linked to the kind of universal, humanist imperialism that the discourse seeks to contest.

union, political party, village, prison" (82). A cognitive framework based around collectivities, Ahmad suggests, can free up the possibility of a type of reading that operates "not in nationalistic terms but simply as a relation between private and public, personal and communal" (82).

In the context of this study, the larger, less restrictive vision of postcolonial reading involves a collectivity defined specifically in terms of the disjunction between public and private, between some smaller vision of the world, and the grander vision or grand narrative that encloses it. Bluntly, it considers the outmoded beliefs of Waugh's gentlemen as part of a collectivity which includes other, more serious, instances where older ways of life are displaced by the hegemony of newer ones.<sup>2</sup> This, I believe, is a kind of marginality defined not in terms of nation, wealth, or history, but in terms of cultural practise, in terms of the chasm between older practises which sustain the individual and newer ones which treat his or her continued presence as anachronistic and insignificant. In "Circling the Downspout of Empire," Linda Hutcheon associates postcolonialism most importantly with "marginalization, with the state of... ex-centricity" (132). In the case of Waugh's dispossessed gentlemen, this idea has particular force because they are not just ex-centric in the sense that they are of marginal importance, but also, and more significantly, ex-centric insofar as they are *formerly* centric; they are ex-centric the way some of us are ex-husbands and ex-wives.

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<sup>2</sup> For obvious reasons, it is inappropriate to use the word "settler" culture to refer to the emancipation of the English working class (who were always there), yet it seems clear that "the English Gentleman" did experience the kind of large and sweeping reorganization of his "native" rights and privileges that we traditionally associate with the arrival of some colonial force.



A more sustained and specific examination of the applicability of postcolonial thought to the *Sword of Honour* trilogy follows later in this chapter. For now, it is just necessary to emphasize this study's preoccupation with the relationship between interior and exterior worlds. Rather than firmly positioning Waugh himself in some larger political enterprise, this study examines his characters as they exist on the slippery border between the world(s) they envision and the world they encounter in their daily lives. In place of focusing on *what* Waugh represents or what his values are, I seek to examine the construction and transmission of values in the first place. So, while I am not primarily interested in the merit of Waugh's vision of the universe, I am intensely interested in how the internal worlds of characters (their visions of the world) interact with the values embodied by the larger world outside them. I seek to show both the contingent nature of these visions, the ways in which they are just things people make up, *and* the way this contingent status does absolutely nothing to diminish their potency and force within the "real world." In short, I seek to show that stories, and stories about masculinity in particular, can come to control and shape both the internal and external worlds of individuals to a point at which satisfying some fantasy vision becomes the single, most important thing in the individual's life.

This project takes place in three distinct phases and focuses (after a brief examination of *Vile Bodies*) on Waugh's World War II trilogy, collectively titled *Sword of*

*Honour*<sup>3</sup> The first phase involves a discussion of the interaction between stories (in this case both works of fiction and cultural fictions) and reality. The second seeks to highlight how masculine narratives operate in the novels. The final section examines the implications of the first two relative to some current features of postcolonial criticism and/or postcolonial theory<sup>4</sup> The idea, basically, is to show the ways in which Waugh's quintessentially English novels might fit into existent modes of postcolonial discourse and address the implications that the inclusion of an artist like Waugh might have on the way we approach postcolonial discourses.

As many critics have noted, Waugh's career seems to have had at least three phases. The early satires, like *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*, are marked by what B W Wilson calls a "deliberate heartlessness" (87), operate without the reader's emotional investment, and, as Bernard Bergonzi notes, have their effect by allowing the reader to "laugh at people... colliding like things" (25).<sup>5</sup> Without an emotional attachment to the characters, the reader can experience destructive fluctuations of fate in a removed and amused fashion, viewing Waugh's fictional personages as flat people, not just flat characters. Indeed, their lack of depth is part of Waugh's point and intended as a clear indication of the unhinged nature of modern society. These detached narratives

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<sup>3</sup> In almost all cases I will be addressing the trilogy in terms of its three distinct novels, *Men at Arms*, *Officers and Gentlemen*, and *Unconditional Surrender* (or *The End of the Battle*) rather than the collected and abridged version found in the single binding of *Sword of Honour*.

<sup>4</sup> Despite its importance to the overall argument, the final section is significantly briefer than the first two because of its preoccupation with possible, rather than actual, applications. While the first two sections prove certain things are true about the trilogy, the final section (because it leads directly into my discussion of more conventionally postcolonial works) has fewer specifics because it is primarily interested in what *can be done* in the postcolonial field.

<sup>5</sup> Bergonzi sees such collisions in terms of Bergson's vision of farce.

eventually give way to the kind of "Tory Romanticism" (Bergonzi 23) the reader finds in *A Handful of Dust* and *Brideshead Revisited*. These novels, essentially elegies for a lost (traditional and elitist) way of life, depend on the reader's sympathy for characters like Tony Last and Charles Ryder. Given the nature of Waugh's lament, it is not surprising that reaction to the work in this middle period is mixed. Readers who can sympathize with Waugh's characters find these novels moving, while other readers find it very easy to dislike these new protagonists, and, as a result, find the novels to be excessive, tedious, and even ridiculous. The third phase of Waugh's career includes *Sword of Honour* and represents, in many important respects, a reconciliation of the earlier two. In *Sword of Honour*, the narrative fluctuations of the early phase return in the "succession of absurd and ignominious episodes, cruel excesses [and] mistaken alliances" (Bradbury 106) that is WWII, while the reader's emotional identification with a single character, Guy Crouchback, remains strong. Crudely, *Sword of Honour* shows people colliding like things, while at the same time emphasizing the particularly *human* processes of individuals.

### ***Vile Bodies*: Flat Characters and Fictional Facts**

As early as *Vile Bodies* (1930), Waugh's pre-occupation with the relationship between fictional (made-up) worlds and the real one is evident. The second chapter of the novel begins with Adam Fenwick-Syme's unfortunate experience with a customs officer who announces that the Home Secretary is "particularly against books" (1B 25) and believes that, even "if we can't stamp out literature in the country, we can at least stop its

being brought in from outside (1725). Almost immediately thereafter, Adam's manuscript is incinerated and one of the novel's most essential plots (Adam as gossip columnist) is set into motion. More important to this study, the struggle to manage and contain (or inversely to proliferate) narrative gets underway. Indeed, the lasting joke that stems from the Home Secretary's aversion to books (and the literal burning of Adam's manuscript) is not about the Home Secretary's Cro-Magnon sensibilities, but about his incompetence; in the end, the joke isn't that he's a thug and an idiot burning books, but that he's a thug and idiot who is hopelessly inept at doing what he wants to do: control the circulation of stories. It's not that he's a bully; he's a bumbler.

The oft-critiqued, oft-practised practise of burning books is, of course, based on the assumption that "previous fictions have helped to call into being subsequent realities" (Henkle and Polhemus 1) and some fear about what these realities might be. In Waugh's world, however, the effort to control and limit disconcerting stories is an absolutely hopeless one. A big part of this hopelessness arises because of the distinct, but intimately connected relationships between the realm of story and the realm of reality. It is obvious that the Home Secretary is not an avid reader and obvious that he is not overly concerned with what goes on in the airy-fairy world of the imagination, but his behaviour suggests a real paranoia about the impact imagination has on the "real" world (where the incited masses might well start to vote differently or throw rocks through bank windows). His efforts in the realm of the imagination, however, like his predecessors' efforts at controlling the swinish multitudes, are finally disjointed and unsuccessful ones because

they attempt to contain wildly fluctuating, ceaselessly inventive entities which refuse to maintain their "proper" places and proportions relative to everything around them.

Still, in spite of all this fear of the mind's fancy, it is worth remembering that Adam's is not a work of fiction, but his own autobiography. The customs agent is willing to "stretch the point" (I'B 26) and allow Adam to maintain his history books, but Adam's own personal history is destroyed. If one wants to be grandiose about these things, this is a kind of microcosmic instance where the *U/r* narrative is sustained, while the individual's potentially disturbing story is destroyed; and, even though I do not want to be grandiose, such a reading does have some serious value. One generally attacks what one fears (hence the relative safety of babies and puppies), and fear is an implicit recognition that one's opponent is formidable. Thus, it is important to remember that, while a *person* as obscure and insignificant as Adam (as opposed to someone important like Agatha Runcible) is not a worthy target of official scrutiny (they don't give *him* the cavity search), his books, his stories, are threatening. In this sense, Adam's experience (juxtaposed with Agatha's) highlights the fact that his narratives are in many ways more substantial (and more seriously treated) than he is.

Financially destitute, Adam is forced to take a job at London Tabloid. And, when he takes the job as gossip columnist at the appropriately named *Daily Excess* there is, at least officially, a crucial change in venue. No longer an author, but still a writer, Adam's job at the *newspaper* is as a purveyor of (albeit superfluous) fact. The professional and literal demise of Adam's predecessor, Simon Balcairn, results from his inability to gather data from the socialite crowd. As reporters, both Simon and Adam are required to *report*

on subjects and events whose existences owe nothing to the presence of those doing the reporting. They are supposed to be transparent participants in the processes we commonly call news-reporting: something happens to someone, then someone else writes it down; later people read about what happened.

This all seems simple enough, and when Simon, unable to get "the facts," begins to create them, several problems arise. His breach of the rules that govern reporting, his unauthorized transgression into fiction, results in his suicide and a number of lawsuits against his paper. All of this suggests a stable universe. The "truth" that Simon's story is a lie comes out, Simon kills himself to avoid humiliation and the actions of those wronged by the false story leave the British legal system "practically paralyzed" (*IB* 109) for a long period of time. The real people refute the fake images of themselves; order is restored, and Simon's fiction is, in the customs agent's words, stamped out.

But, this superficial sense of order is only Waugh's preamble to a larger and more pervasive sense of flux. Like the Home Secretary's efforts to control "subversive propaganda" (*IB* 26), the legal proceedings of the respectable citizens of London do not secure a coherent and stable order; instead, both efforts undermine stable truth by collectively, indirectly and unintentionally installing Adam in the world of fact<sup>6</sup>. Because of the lawsuits arising from Simon's slander, Adam is forbidden to use the names of most of the high-ranking socialites and his gossip-fodder quickly becomes scarce. Like his

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<sup>6</sup> The efforts to destroy fiction do not kill it, but make it stronger. In this and several other scenarios in this study, fiction seems a Darwinian survivor of the highest order.

predecessor, Adam lacks the raw materials to construct news, so after a brief time reporting on "remarkable invalids," Adam begins to "invent people" (1*B* 112).

Interestingly, Adam's wholly invented people tend to win him more success than Simon's partially invented scenarios and this development is important to the interpretation of the novel as a whole. Adam's successes with Captain Stuart Kerr and Imogen Quest indicate that Simon's error was one of degree, not one of kind. Simon fails to obscure the nature of his fiction by leaving tangible links, leaving a trail back, to the truth. He is found out because there are individuals who are able to verify and/or refute his story. Adam does not suffer the same fate as Simon because he creates what some have called "pure fiction" (Lamarque and Olsen 53),<sup>7</sup> a narrative whose truth-quotient is too difficult for most people to ascertain. In this way, Simon's mistake is not that he made his story up, but that he did not make *all* of it up.

Thus, the ability to control fiction is importantly linked to the transparency of the fictional nature of an utterance or a text. If it is easy to validate (or invalidate) a story, its fictional possibilities diminish. If such verification is difficult or impossible, the narrative possibilities increase. In their study *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen note that

The fictive dimension of stories (or narratives) is explicable only in terms of a rule-governed practice, central to which are a certain mode of utterance

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<sup>7</sup> I borrow this term from Lamarque and Olsen although the above application does not exactly fit the strictest parameters for the application of it.

(the fictive utterance) and a certain complex of attitudes (the fictive stance). (32)

Thus, a story is considered fiction not necessarily by nature of its truth or its falsity, but by nature of a transaction whereby a signal is transmitted *from* a certain position *to* a certain position. Adam's success lies in his ability to create fictive utterances without bothering about his audience's fictive stance. They think he is a reporter, and because they assume what we might call a realistic stance, they assume he is transmitting realistic utterances. When he fails to signal the fictional nature of his reporting they, quite understandably, assume he is observing the rules of the practise of news reporting, namely that he is talking about real people and real events.

And, while Waugh is obviously trying to point out foolishness in a select group who are taken in by these tricks, the above vision of narrative and the world is neither ridiculous nor unrealistic. Because the apprehension of a work of art (or artifice) is importantly linked to several contextual and conceptual frameworks, a work of art must (generally<sup>8</sup>) denote itself as art, if it is to function as art, just as, say, news must denote itself as news if it is to function as news. When the contextual boundaries break down, or are obscured, trying to figure out how to read, perceive, accept a set of signals can be pretty difficult to do and Adam's audience is not unusual in this respect. Without the necessary contextual help, the boundary between news stories and imaginary stories gets really fuzzy. The people who believed *The War of The Worlds* was a newscast, for

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<sup>8</sup> Obviously this does not apply to works of "guerrilla art" (street installations etc.) which operate on the assumption that the audience is not aware that they are viewing consciously constructed works of art.



example, thought so only because they didn't get the usual signals ("now back to our presentation of Orson Welles' *The War of the Worlds*" or something like that) outlining the framework for what they were hearing. These people were not, I think, unusually stupid; they were just encouraged to place a set of signals in the wrong cognitive space. The effect of this type of encouragement is that fiction and fact can and do pass for one another at times when information is either unavailable or obscured.

And, the outward manifestations of the collapse of the above boundaries are at least as significant as their mental and psychological counterparts. The confusion between fiction and reality does not remain a strictly internal matter. Instead, Adam's stories "rebound" and begin to have fairly serious consequences on the external environment. The fact that Adam is not "found out" (at least by the public) does not lead to passive contemplation, but ready action. His inventions begin to have an impact on the real world. (This is, of course, exactly what the Home Secretary was trying to avoid in the first place.<sup>9</sup>) Exploiting the subtle distinction between telling and making, Adam's column is not merely accepted; it acts as a directive.

When J. L. Austin speaks of the "performative utterance," he describes linguistic acts where a person "is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something" (106). These utterances do not report events, but instead they *are* events. When a man says "I do" next to a woman in a white dress in a certain context, he is not just describing an event but rather performing an act, the act of marriage. In a more subtle fashion and with

a more discrete context. Adam does much the same thing by producing implicit directives about dress and conduct to social climbers eager to become what fashionable circles not so subtly *tell* them to become. Adam's columns cease to be *reports* of what has happened, and instead start to dictate what happens next when the fictitious Imogen Quest becomes "a byword for social inaccessibility-- the final goal of all climbers" (1*B* 115). Imogen becomes *the* thing to be, even though she does not have any *being*, and the young women want to become what they are told to become even though that thing isn't there. And, as the forthcoming study of *The Sword of Honour* will indicate, the desire to be something that *is not*, is sometimes not very far from wanting not to be.

The surreal atmosphere of Waugh's universe is not unreal, however, just hard to believe. It is wrong to think of Waugh's works as fantasies, because he is always absolutely sure to emphasize that everything *is* exactly as it seems to his reader, if not his characters. Adam's fictitious "Very Important Person Indeed" (1*B* 115) influences the equally fictitious Captain Stuart Kerr's choices so that together they set a real footwear trend of the season, the trend of wearing "black suede shoes" (1*B* 116). Still, the joke in the novel is not so much about the ridiculousness of things we haven't seen before; it's about things we see all the time. The tendency to think that Waugh is an absurdist is far off-target because his is not a made-up, farcical world, just a made-up presentation of a real farcical world. The humour lies not in the creation of a fantastic world where everything is different than our daily experience, but in the continuous shift in focus

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, given the scale of popular impact one expects from most first publications, the Home Secretary would have been well-advised to let Adam keep his manuscript if he didn't want Adam to reach

between a world that we recognize and, through the use of omniscient narration, one where we can look "behind the curtain" at the people constructing the narratives we are consciously or unconsciously living.

Taking all of the above into account, Adam's column provides a clear instance where fiction controls reality, where what is true is subservient to the story he makes up. And for Waugh, this is more than just a powerful comedic approach; it's also a fairly direct commentary on the amount of stability we can expect to find in what he called "the modern world".<sup>10</sup> Attempting to highlight the chaotic and volatile nature of the values the bright young people represent, he divorces them not just from tradition and logic, but from the whole realm of concrete existence. That is, he founds a culture, or at least a part of one, based not just on bad or shoddy principles, or weak and self-indulgent ideas, but on *nothing* whatsoever. Other satirists have noticed the folly in the emperor's new clothes, but they have at least retained the emperor. By using Kerr, Waugh goes one giant step further. Kerr isn't missing clothes; he's just plain missing, and, what's more, everyone else is clamouring to wear his clothes.

I have spent all of this time outlining the interaction between fiction and reality in *Vile Bodies* not primarily for its own sake, but to provide a kind of microcosm, a blue-print for a similar analysis of *Sword of Honour*. The transparent and small-scale manipulations that Adam accomplishes show how narrative can override truth, but the

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anybody...

<sup>10</sup> Despite several charges of traditionalism, Waugh's world can be seen as quintessentially "post-modern" insofar as it is every bit as disjointed and "carnavalesque" as, say, Pynchon's. The difference is only that Waugh complains about it rather than celebrates it.

tone in *Vile Bodies* arises, at least partially, from the triviality of the stakes. Waugh shows that real events can be controlled and adjusted by stories, and that stories can call real events into being, but the real events take place on the level of parties and fashion choices and the stories appear in the gossip column of newspaper of questionable reputation. Waugh carefully avoids developing the motivations of his characters so that the impression is not so much that the author has failed or refused to reveal the depths of his characters, but rather that there is nothing "deep" in them to be revealed. As already suggested, they are flat people, not just flat characters. As such, the reader focuses primarily on the machinations of a small and trivial world without the tension that accompanies any emotional or psychological concern about the results of these machinations. Tragedies, even deaths, are not seriously upsetting because Waugh thwarts the reader's emotional investment in his characters long before it has a chance to really get going.

This is not so for the *Sword of Honour* trilogy. Because of the presence of complex characters, most notably Guy Crouchback, in the trilogy, it requires a different approach than *Vile Bodies*, and will be addressed in two sub-sections highlighting two distinct impulses in Waugh's work. The first essentially mimics the approach I took with *Vile Bodies* and seeks to observe how stories control people's lives and move them about "like things," while the second focuses on the ways in which stories are internalized by characters to show how they affect them "as people." The first observes the power of secret "copybooks," botched messages, phony propaganda and outright lies in Waugh's rendering of the Second World War, while the second focuses on the more deep-rooted and seemingly permanent visions of self Guy and others seem to inherit from their various

narrative and/or cultural traditions. In *Sword of Honour* people are no longer things, but their human dignity, such as it is, is prone to the same kinds of narrative manipulation as the flat, valueless characters of *Vile Bodies*.

### **Colliding Like Things: People as Narrative Objects**

On a superficial level, *Sword of Honour* trilogy belongs to a long tradition of "War novels." Certainly, the historical precedents to these kinds of novels are greater than those governing Waugh's early novels, but the trilogy is not, in any traditional sense a war novel precisely because the war itself, or at least the traditional narration of war, is so absent from its pages. Waugh provides so few of the "vicarious thrills normally offered by war fiction" (Trout 127-8) that some have suggested the trilogy is "not a war novel" (LaFrance 25) at all. These critics, noting the absence of any of the usual blood and guts, trench-death sequences, and, perhaps more significantly, the almost total lack of "the enemy" as a potent and present force, conclude that WWII is just the "external cause" (La France 25) that throws Guy into crisis.

But, while it is true that the fight with the foe is continuously obscured and that Guy does forget to shoot the one time he actually sees a German soldier, it remains impossible to overestimate the necessity of the war to *Sword of Honour's* effect. The war occupies a different place in Waugh's novels than it does in most other novels about war, but the presence of the war is among the absolutely essential aspects of the novel as a whole. No other "external cause" could possibly do. The war is not just *a* thing, but *the*

thing, not just for these three books, but for the whole of the Twentieth Century. The fact that it can be obscured by "bumf and telephones" (*MA* 217) just re-emphasizes that, in a radically unstable and disorganized world, apprehending seemingly straightforward situations and executing necessary actions can be incredibly difficult. Everyone knows the war is there and that it is the most important thing going on in the novels; the question is, "Are these people ever going to get around to it or are there too many layers of bumf in the way?" And, when they never do get to the war in any successful way, Waugh locates not just a problematic set of priorities and values, but a world where truth and necessity are routinely disrupted by bad signals that do get through and good ones that do not. The numerous narratives, complete and incomplete, and the prodigious amounts of "information," true and untrue, that Guy encounters seem to hijack his efforts to fight the real war and leave him fighting various battles with *stories* (not countries) just to get to the war he volunteered to fight and to get into the narrative he wants to be inside.

In *Sword of Honour*, the war functions as the fundamental reality which, despite its incredible magnitude, struggles to assert itself in the face of various fictions. Unlike *Vile Bodies*, where the realities being manipulated are incidental and insignificant, *Sword of Honour* posits the fundamental reality of the Twentieth Century as the victim of overriding narrative manipulation. While the Bright Young Things might be expected to participate in "a succession of absurd and ignominious episodes" (Bradbury 106), no one expects (necessarily) the same thing from entire nations at war. Waugh collapses the difference between Ritchie-Hook, Grace-Groundling-Marchpole, and Arthur Box-Bender on one

side and Adam, Simon and Nina on the other, and, in so doing collapses the difference between all-out war and society columns.

But, because the war demands significance of its own accord it is impossible to conclude that the war is no more important than Adam's column. Instead, the reader recognizes just that the war (perhaps noble in and of itself) is being operated under principles that are far too much like Adam's and concludes that, if these really *are* the makers of history, our history is little other than a dubious narrative construction.

*Men at Arms* opens with Guy rejoicing in the simplification of the narrative of his own life. Confused, and stalled in a "dry and negative chastity" (*MA* 17), alienated from friends and countrymen, the "modern age in arms" (*MA* 12) seems to offer Guy (and Waugh's readers) a standardized story of redemption where "the gentleman soldier" defeats fearful foe, a chance to participate in an entirely meaningful story world. With the "enemy at last in plain view, huge and hateful" (*MA* 12), Guy prepares to join a just cause, triumph over evil and so restore his faith in, to varying degrees, himself, God, and his country. This standard narrative, well-worn in the minds of both the reader and Guy forms the structural and narrative base of the whole trilogy. It is the underlying story which struggles, in the face of many competitors, to survive throughout the remainder of the three novels.

Indeed, *Sword of Honour* can be seen as drawn out battle over narrative survival. In a pretty serious way, Guy is not just a "character" in terms of the interaction between the novel and the reader, but also a character who is subjected to the various narratives he encounters *inside* the text. One of the major questions that arises over and over again is

"Who is writing the story of Guy's life?"<sup>11</sup> Guy struggles to be a character in Truslove's stories, while Kilbannock, Grace-Groundling-Marchpole and others routinely (and almost always against his will) construct their own very different versions of what type of character Guy should be.

Throughout the trilogy, the successes and failures of characters depend largely on their positions relative to dominant and/or marketable narratives. Almost immediately upon his return to England, Guy's military ambitions stumble when his brother-in-law, Arthur Box-Bender, a Member-of-Parliament, highlights the contingency of several principles Guy erroneously assumes to be hardwired into his standardized story of warfare. While Guy believes the war must be "concerned with justice" (*MA* 25), Arthur is aware that the nation's behaviour and policy rely on some "quite ticklish" (*MA* 25) manoeuvres that take place completely outside the realms of Guy's absolutes.<sup>12</sup> As a politician, Arthur is primarily occupied with the kind of story the government is planning tell, and so he readily sees the aspects of Guy's ambitions which will not fit inside the narrative that is currently under construction.

This being the case, his advice to Guy takes place not on the level of right and wrong or truth and falsity, but rather in terms of Guy's place in the story he sees developing. He tells Guy "not to expect much encouragement" (*MA* 19) in his military ambitions because the time of "retired colonels dyeing their hair and enlisting in the ranks"

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<sup>11</sup> This is particularly so because of the limitations the military places on individuals. The "orders" Guy and others receive amount to a kind of authorship over their lives whereby some one (or something) else creates the content of an individual's actions and, not infrequently, his or her thoughts.



(*MA* 19) ended after WWI. And, even though such gestures are "all very gallant," "it won't happen this time [because] the whole thing is planned" (*MA* 19). Here, "the plan", which is little beyond a narrative strategy, is shown to be of primary importance, while moral qualities like being gallant are relatively useless and/or pointless. The qualities that Guy considers to be the absolute essence of the war (justice, gallantry, honour etc.) are powerless against the admittedly contingent and constructed "official view" (*MA* 24) of the way the war functions and the question is not usually whether Britain will surrender to Germany, but whether Guy will surrender to the vision of Britain embodied by Box-Bender and others.

Because the official view, the dominant narrative, makes his reality, Guy's experience in the war is one of constant negotiation between the strictly rigid and the ghostly immaterial. Despite his original hopes, Guy is fighting a foe that never really does come out in the open and he has a very difficult time defending himself against certain stories because he cannot strike a blow against things he cannot touch. And, even though the war machine continually manoeuvres and manipulates him, it remains almost impossible for Guy to locate the source of these manipulations. Thus, the war (like Imogen Quest) becomes something that is at once omni-present, concretely there, and something that has simply been made up. For Guy, the "official view," "the correct channels" (*MA* 116), and the media's view of things are not impotent little stories, but impassable barriers whenever he seems to fall on the wrong side of them. Waugh's war is

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<sup>12</sup> This, of course, is one of Waugh's favourite constructions, the negotiation between absolute principles (or truth) and complete contingency/chaos, which represents some kind of falsity.

one where the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Intelligence are more important than the Home Forces department, where the "war of words" has more impact than rifle fire and mortar.

This being the case, Arthur Box-Bender's original suggestion that Guy join the B.B.C. ends up seeming like a good one for any one interested in making a real difference in the war effort. There is no doubt that image-conscious, copy-friendly characters like Kilbannock and Trimmer have a more serious impact on the complexion of the war than Guy ever has because reality and truth have such a hard time asserting themselves. What Trimmer is *not* (which is to say, a hero) is more important than what Guy is (a sincere soldier) because Ian *makes* Trimmer's story true to his readers, the British people. And, inside this context, it is not even really contradictory that Trimmer is both the fulfillment of Guy's dreams of military heroism and his vision of a "revolting little soul" (*MA* 104). Just as Stuart-Kerr's shoes are the real fashion trend of the season, Trimmer is both the real face of the war and a completely fictitious entity, a rigid signifier and a figment of someone's imagination.

Indeed, the manufacturing of Trimmer's story represents one of the trilogy's most skillful and rewarding achievements. In his early days as a failure with the Halberdiers, Trimmer fails because he is unable to recognize the importance of tradition, order, and history. It is not just coincidence that the commanders decide to "run through a little corps history" (*MA* 48) while Trimmer is away fixing some error in his gear. Instead, it serves to emphasize Trimmer's lack of connection with what up to now appears to be the Halberdiers' approach to life and to the military, which involves so much of what Guy

believes in and values. Trimmer's lack of attention to a specific detail directly results in his absence while others are acquiring what Guy would consider to be key information about the foundation of corps.

Foundation, of course, is the key. The relative positions of Guy and Trimmer in Halberdier training reflect their relative importance inside what appears to be a stable universe. Guy more or less succeeds in training because he is so moved by "the two centuries of uninterrupted habitation" (*MA* 86) in the ante-room, while Trimmer fails because his "civilian antecedents" are probably "theatrical" (*MA* 46). That is, Guy succeeds because the Halberdiers, at this stage anyway, affirm the values Guy has internalized through the war stories of Truslove and others, while Trimmer's malleable approach to life (later highlighted through the revelations about his various identities) does not fit well inside the rigors of boot-polishing, attention-standing, and proper-dressing. Thus, the release of Trimmer seems like nothing other than just censure (executed in Ritchie-Hook's unequivocal manner) for a job poorly and dishonourably done.

But, like Simon Balcairn's demise, the early problems Trimmer faces in training serve as a kind of "last stand" for the stable universe before a more radical and pervasive sense of flux and fragmentation takes over. Guy's early sense of belonging never amounts to anything because the values instilled in his early training are found either to be faulty or impotent as the novels progress. Instead of following along the stable storyline the Halberdiers suggest, the original plots involving tradition, honour, loyalty, bravery etc. are hi-jacked by people like Ian Kilbannock and sold back in dubious packages to a waiting and gullible populous. Because Kilbannock has no interest in stability or truth, the

stories he writes progress without any concern for these ideas, and the structures of both his stories (and Waugh's stories about people like him) end up fragmented as a result. The narrative disjunctions found everywhere in the trilogy are simply direct reflections of a reality that is itself being created by disjointed narratives. The chaotic structure of the trilogy, of Waugh's work of fiction, is the only appropriate form for the reality that people like Kilbannock are creating.

And, perhaps more importantly, in a volatile wartime context, the creation of fictional characters can have serious real-life consequences. The movie Kilbannock makes about Trimmer's non-existent heroism affects the King of England (himself a supposed marker of tradition and stability) to such a degree that he commissions the Sword of Stalingrad and models it after the dagger Trimmer wears in the film. This sword in turn, becomes the emblem of the Anglo-Russian alliance. The result, both comic and tragic, is that Ian's efforts to make a working-class hero out of Trimmer have made an impact on the highest possible levels of government, have helped to create and affirm huge military alliances, and, in so doing changed the "real" world forever. Further, since swords themselves are ancient and time-honoured emblems of principles like merit, truth, and honour (hence the title of the trilogy), the Sword of Stalingrad, with its roots in Trimmer's theatrics, represents the categorical defeat and absence of those principles in the war effort.

More poignantly, an individual's *lack* of stability and sincerity invariably contributes to his success inside the military machine. Trimmer's theatrical nature makes him an ideal subject for Kilbannock's narrative because he does not seem to have any

inviolable principles of his own. While *The Daily Excess* experiences a flood of libel suits from people who are essentially saying "I'm not really like that," Trimmer does not seem to know or care much about what he is really like. If war is primarily about defending a way of life, of asserting who we are as individuals and nation, Trimmer is the poorest sort of hero because he readily admits that the story of his own life is "more Kilbannock's story really" (*OG* 150). He concedes his own material and spiritual unreality even as he is becoming a "larger than life" symbol of spiritual fortitude to others. And, because of the nature of reality in the trilogy, these seemingly self-canceling positions can exist without any real difficulty: they're just some further examples of sensationalistic story overriding an impotent truth. By the time the Second World War rolls around, the litigious crew that peopled *File Bodies* has essentially disappeared; in *Sword of Honour*, the real world is not able or willing to file a grievance, and the story world never has to yield a thing.

The fact that Trimmer is both immaterial and a kind of organizing principle to a whole class if not a whole nation is simply the embodiment of a more pervasive problem with authority, communication and action throughout the three novels, and finds significant parallels in the Waugh's representations of the military structure. As almost everyone knows, the military system depends upon a strictly designated and immutable structure of authority and command designed to streamline action. The "lower orders" are not to contemplate the larger scheme of things; instead, they follow clear and direct orders. In this system, the firmest belief in order is manifested in a refusal to consider it. Individual soldiers abdicate their individual judgments (they're not encouraged to deal with underlying causes) and accept some collective destiny as ordained by those who are, in the

vernacular of the trilogy, "in the picture." The assumption is that, while the grand scheme of things is not apparent to everyone, or even most people, it does, in fact, exist, and every one is working simultaneously toward a universally accepted goal: the defeat of the enemy.

This stable assumption, naturally, runs into serious problems in the trilogy. Guy and his fellow soldiers can neither make sense of things themselves, nor trust those who are supposed to be making sense for them, and, like the public's relationship to Trimmer, the soldier's relationship to the military machine is one where he is continuously dealing with something that both is and is not there. Order, in the usual sense of the word, collapses even as "sudden, unexplained commands and cancellations" (*MA* 197) proliferate. And, because "orders" and order are at odds, the soldier is neither free enough to decide for himself, nor confident in the ability of those who decide for him. In these situations, the large-scale plan, the ultimate goal, vanishes, and one confronts a network that is as inescapable as it is inefficient.

This problem with the big picture in military affairs is viewed in direct opposition to the overriding order represented by religious faith. The difference is that faith offers a kind of fundamental truth in place of chaotic fictions. As James F. Carens puts it, Waugh posits a "supernatural order that contrasts with the disintegrating forces of the war" (144). The obvious links relative to the fate of men's souls and the idea of "higher powers" aside, the connections and disconnections between faith in God and faith in government are instructive. Both God and the gods of war seem to work in mysterious ways and point toward glorious ends, but they seem to exist and act in two fundamentally different

worlds, one stable and sustaining, the other unstable and dangerous. In Waugh's novels, God gives subtle directives toward salvation, while the military gives direct but incomprehensible orders toward either nothing at all or death.

When Guy tells the chaplain that "the Supernatural Order... *is* everyday life... and what we call 'real' is a mere shadow" (*MA* 77), he explicitly affirms Pavel's comment that mythic structures are "endowed with *more* weight and stability than the mortals' spaces" (77), and clarifies his orientation relative to the trilogy's two major narrative forces. His comments about supernatural forces are as applicable to the military higher powers as they are to God, and the surreal atmosphere that surrounds so much of the trilogy is based largely on the presentation of a single soldier attempting to maintain faith in an overriding and harmonious order in the face of so much evidence to the contrary. Like searching for signs of divine providence in earthly matters, the efforts of the soldiers to believe that their orders (their commandments) are all to the good run into problems which shake their faith that there is any order whatsoever. And, like the commandments to those with weak faith, the less than superlative orders the soldiers receive are at once the central organizing principles of their lives (they are the words, the texts, which make up the real content of their lives) *and* completely inapplicable to anything that matters to them at all. Indeed, Guy's salvation at the end of *Unconditional Surrender* is essentially defined by his movement away from the dangerously unhinged narrative of military glory and into a private and intimate acceptance of God's, rather than his country's, plan. He begins with a shaky sense of faith and a keen interest in military honour and closes with his acceptance

of his place in God's plan, having given up his place in the narratives of glory, honour and courage.

As Carens has noted, Waugh punctuates the trilogy's key events in terms of the religious calendar in order to contrast the clearly organized progression of the religious life with its military counterpart. While the *content* of the religious life is apparent to all, its harmony obvious (the birth of Christ, followed by his ministry, his passion, death, and resurrection) and its goal (salvation) clear, the content and aim of most of the orders Guy and others receive are rarely anything but confusing, and frequently quite dangerous.

In the context I am employing here, God tells a more compelling and comprehensible story. Narrative is never subverted, but stable, sustaining narratives have happier resolutions than unstable ones. And, while it seems obvious that the military leaders are godlike in their powers, they are something closer to the gods of the Greeks and, consequently, the stories the soldiers live are appropriately marked by farce and tragedy: the soldiers face a hydra-headed, multiply directed league of lords who give capricious orders, forget they gave them, and wage war against each other with the lives of their inferiors.

As a result, it is very difficult to find even the most basic of values in the military system because there does not seem to be any true base to their project. This is emphasized by the room assignments at Kut-al-Imara house where each room is a memorial to a WWI battle where "errors in strategic analysis at the highest levels led to the loss of thousands of lives" (McCarthy 151). Ignoring Ritchie-Hook's dictum about never reinforcing failure, disaster is either not recognized or transmuted into something



totally different in civilian culture. With these kinds of precedents, no one is surprised to learn in *Unconditional Surrender* that General Whale, now "past the zenith of his powers," fondly remembers a "delirious episode" where he "helped drive numerous Canadians to their deaths at Dieppe" (*US* 241). The zenith of power is not found in wisdom or success, but in the absent-minded wielding of power without consideration of external goals or successes. And, despite its place in the world of Whale's imagination, Dieppe (the material manifestation of some terrible military musing) remained a real place where following orders was of the utmost importance to real people; it was a place where real commands had real consequences and where certain stories and certain lives were abruptly terminated.

Because of these problems with the grand scheme, the war that Guy experiences takes place at a much lower level, where bogus, botched, or misused messages make up the real content of the war. When Guy first arrives at the Halberdiers, he is puzzled when he attempts to ascertain "what system of selection [could] produce[] so non-descript a group" (*MA* 46) because he is still searching for an underlying motive or principle which precedes action. He is trying to discern what type of *plot* might involve this cast of characters. But, this natural effort to calibrate one's position, to figure out how things work, can only work if there is a *system* (of selection, of narrative, of morality, of logic...) in place. When there isn't any clear evidence of a system, the choice is either to assume it must be there somewhere and go "by the book," or to attempt to make sense of the situation oneself.

And, however much the Military structure demands that he follow orders and that he go by the book, Guy is repeatedly confronted with the inadequacy of the story the book tells. The unquestioned acceptance of orders, like the use of codes and abbreviations, only makes things more efficient if all the hocus-pocus finally designates something to the someone who is *supposed* to get it. But, as Guy's experience with the Loamshires indicates, an overdeveloped belief in a malfunctioning system of (narrative or other) authority is a recipe for disaster. Already operating under officially transmitted but bogus assumptions about imminent enemy invasion, Guy appeals to proper military procedure to determine the legitimacy of the Loamshires. Because he has not been informed of their arrival and he has been warned of the enemy spies, he determines that the Loamshires are the "fifth columnists...here at last" (*MA* 210), and, "[a]s he had seen done in films" (*MA* 210) Guy writes a surreptitious note while inspecting their uniforms for any breaches in policy which might reveal them as conspirators. Adhering too closely to protocol, Guy considers the fact they are not in proper uniform to be the result of a breakdown in enemy espionage and the silence of the junior officer as an attempt to mask a "teutonic" (*MA* 210) accent.

Here, as elsewhere, Guy's primary problem is in his assumption of competence and stability in the storyline the army is creating. He assumes not that his own military machine is lax, but that the enemy has failed to account for the well-oiled, well-informed efficiency of people like himself. His personal desire to be a hero, coupled with his residual beliefs in the rightness and the solidity of "his side" result in a very dangerous situation. And, amidst his visions of heroism and glory, his biggest mistakes are in his

inability to accept the realities of laziness and incompetence; the Loamshires, like the rest of the soldiers Guy encounters, are simply indifferent to their dress, and Sarum-Smith is just a very poor secretary. There is no deeper plan, just surface incompetence. And, while Guy is fumbling with the "correct form" of a message that is as absurd and incomprehensible as "D Coy to 2 Bn via Bde HQ..." the Loamshires are "one untimely piece of horseplay" (*MA* 213) away from their deaths because the fictive stance has not been clarified; they are not in the story (hence the situation) they think they're in. The tension in the whole passage is based around a discrepancy in narrative. Guy and the Loamshires believe themselves to be characters in two very different stories, one romantic, one realistic. Guy assumes some "supernatural order" must account for the breakdown in the system he has been trained to accept, while the Loamshires, more well acquainted with the "bumf" of military life take such discrepancies to be quite normal and assume the scene has been set in a similar way for Guy as well.

The problem here, as elsewhere, has something to do with reconciling *vision* and *sight*, with reconciling what one perceives in one's head and one's heart and what one sees with one's eyes. Guy's vision of war intersects with what he sees of war in moments like the one described above, and the question is whether he will adjust his whole head or just his pupils. After yet another Allied setback, the narrator says that "for those who followed events and thought about the future, the world's foundations seemed to shake, [while] for the Halberdiers it was one damned thing after another" (*MA* 203). The sharp juxtaposition between "the world's foundations" and the "one damned thing" corresponds directly to the vision/sight distinction; Guy's vision is obsessed with foundations, and his

eyes find only bumf. But, in this type of unstable situation, his insistence on immutable foundations, on order, is very dangerous. His decision to fit the Loamshires into the world's foundations rather than the one damned things is his most dangerous affront to them.

In situations of randomness, then, ascribing value is almost as dangerous as abandoning the concept altogether. Like Guy himself, the Loamshires are hollow markers, flat characters at the mercy of dubious forces. In *Sword of Honour*, the detached emotionless narrator of *Vile Bodies* finds his parallel in the lack of interest of the military establishment who view their men as "a pile of chips" to be plonked "down on the roulette board" (MA 70). Like Nina Blount's drunken and destructive drive in circles, the soldiers find themselves moving in dangerous and delirious patterns of narrative that have almost no chance at any successful or satisfying resolution.

### **Becoming a Real Person: Masculine Narrativity as Personal Legitimacy**

Still, despite the empty manipulation of people as things in the novel, there are some deep and personal struggles being waged as well. The struggle is still with narrative, but this time the field of battle is internalized and is viewed most instructively in terms of the struggle of Guy and others to become, or remain, real men. The comparisons are clear. Just as fictions can call subsequent realities into being, "masculinity... is a fictional construction" (Murphy 1) that is "at once 'made up'...and yet materialize[s] in the social world as [a] structured form with real effects on both men and women (Dawson 21).

Masculinity is, of course, a particularly charged story; it does not operate just on the level of what one wears or where one goes, but on what one thinks, believes, feels etc. It operates not in terms of what one does, but what one *is* and so becomes much more pervasive, powerful and difficult to contest. In Waugh's trilogy, and elsewhere, masculinity convinces its subject to enforce difficult stories on himself such that he is not receiving orders from newspapers or headquarters, so much as he has reached a point where he himself is producing and then pursuing the directives. The result is a situation, described by Roger Horrocks in *Masculinity in Crisis*, where "Big Brother is watching you from inside your own head" (96) telling you to say "I mustn't be myself if I'm to be a man" (96).

H.E. Semple has said that Waugh's primary "preoccupation was with man in relation to God" (53), with "the relation of imperfect man to... perfect ideal" (48), and, while I do not really disagree with him, I think the same problems and tensions can be as well-explored in terms of some sense of imperfect man relative to perfected, ideal *man*. But, while the relationship with God takes place primarily on an internal level, the fears and anxieties associated with masculinity generally require external, public treatments. Transmitted through particular stories, and stored inside the individual's head, the feeling that the individual is not what he thinks he should be results in an intense desire to validate himself in some publicly recognized test that might confirm his status as really masculine.

This is why the war is so attractive to Guy, Apthorpe and Ritchie-Hook. It offers a universally accepted "stage" on which to "act out" their manhood; and, as we shall see later, acting (the voluntary abdication of one's own character and the willful pursuit of

another role) is at the centre of some of their projects. Guy's withdrawal from Crete is explicitly described as a "fatal day" because he is forced to "resign an immeasurable piece of his manhood" (OG 221). Here, lack of success in military terms leads directly to the loss of manhood, a loss which is unequivocally "fatal." Moreover, this connection between masculinity and death is directly linked to the discussion of fictionality insofar as death, the ultimate reality, is given the same ontological significance as "masculinity," a potent fictional contingency. And, just as fictional contingencies frequently override stable realities, so too the idea of manhood is frequently more significant than almost any actual event. The result is that the desire to satisfy the *constructed* vision of the character (in both literary and non-literary senses) and characteristics of true masculinity becomes the central pursuit of the insecure male such that he is willing to, or even hopes to, face death in order to gain the psychological and social validation reserved for real men.

This desire for wartime conditions arises primarily because so many other proving grounds have been reduced or restricted by changing social codes and orders. It is not so much that men like war, but that war offers an opportunity they cannot find anywhere else. In his book *The English Gentleman*, David Castronovo uses fictional prototypes to explain the construction and evolution of the correlation between violent confrontation and masculine legitimacy. Focusing upon Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon*, Castronovo emphasizes the presence of laments for a past when "a man was a man ... and the sword that was worn at his side was at the service of any gentleman's gizzard upon the slightest difference" (24). This strange nostalgia for the opportunity to have a sword put at his throat (or to put his sword at some one else's) arises from a sense that the duel functioned

as a "defense of personal integrity" (Castronovo 26) without which men become doubtful whether they have achieved, or if they have retained their manhood.<sup>13</sup> Without the opportunity for some external validation, they become really unsure of their inner make-up because of the difficulty in distinguishing between a masculinity that is dormant or untested (which might be acceptable) and a masculinity that just isn't there at all (which really wouldn't).

The consistent emphasis on and search for a stage on which to prove one's masculinity is, in many ways, just a desire to occupy a publicly sanctioned role. Insecure about their private spaces, men seek to find places in more pervasive and indisputable structures and derive their individual significance from these structures. Thus, when Castronovo<sup>14</sup> says that "nobility is notability...[and that] to be ignoble is to be unknown" (5) he is essentially saying that one's place in narrative defines one's dignity. A nobleman is one whose name (whether it be his Christian name or his surname, whether he earns or inherits his position) is recognized and revered, while the unrecognized have no dignity such that any man who achieves or retains a recognized place in the nation's narrative also achieves and retains his personal honour. Guy, among the last of those raised to be "gentlemen," and the last of a reduced, once-influential family, has essentially lost his place

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<sup>13</sup> In more contemporary context, Harry Brod suggests something similar in his article "A Case For Men's Studies", when he says that "men are generally nostalgic for a past perceived as embodying more stable and secure masculine identity" (268).

<sup>14</sup> Here, Castronovo is not directly describing the military ideal of masculinity, but the related ideal surrounding "the gentlemen." Of course, this is particularly important when thinking of Guy's "centuries old name", but I think the whole idea of hero, or larger than life personality, can be moved more or less directly across all of the various manifestations (soldier, gentleman, sportsman etc.) of masculinity.

in "modern England" and is seeking a stage on which he might regain some valuable and sustaining notability.

But, as I have already attempted to show, finding the type of stage necessary to gain this kind of public affirmation and recognition can be very tough and many men never really find one. Consequently, Graham Dawson's observation that the "soldier has become a quintessential figure of masculinity" (Dawson 1) is significant because it specifically posits the possibility of becoming a "quintessential figure" through military enterprise. And since this universal external recognition (codified in terms of parades, holidays etc.) in turn eases the internal doubts about one's legitimacy as a man, war (the chance to kill and die) becomes one of the great "opportunities" of a young man's (or in Guy's case, a not so young man's) life.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, the shot at notability can be seen at the centre of the trilogy. The pursuit of a place in psychologically sustaining narratives is what motivates Guy, and basically every remotely complex character in the three books to the point where life and death become secondary concerns. Guy's father is pleased at the assumed death of his nephew because he "could not ask [for] a better death for anyone [he] loved" (*MA* 202). Mr. Crouchback thinks he knows Tony's "regiment too well to think of them giving themselves up" and believes Tony's death is "the *bona mors* for which we pray" (*MA*

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<sup>15</sup> David Gilmore locates the links between masculinity, struggle and death in a slightly different way when he describing masculine "coming of age" rituals as processes in which "boys must steel themselves to enter into... struggles, they must be prepared [for adult masculinity] by various sorts of tempering and toughening. To be men, most of all, they must accept the fact that they are expendable" (223).



202)<sup>16</sup>. Guy's father is untroubled by death if the death can be acknowledged in the tradition of the *hona mors*, an idea that is itself derived (in nearly equal parts) from notions of religious and military valor. In these traditions, the notion of surrender is more upsetting than the young man's death because it compromises his honour and has no definite place in the narratives Mr. Crouchback reads, thinks, and feels.

In his book, *Soldier Heroes: British adventure, empire and the imaging of masculinities*, Graham Dawson refers to the work of Carolyn Steedman in concluding that soldier stories are "among the only stories that...unimportant men have been allowed to tell with any certainty of meeting the narrative expectations and desires of a public audience" (21). What this means, I think, is that the accumulation of soldier stories is a lot like accumulating a *life* story since everything else lacks the recognized narrative formula. Thus, the only way to be a self (to have a story) is to get it from somewhere else and so, as perverse as it might seem, Tony Box-Bender's supposed passing away is also his *showing up*: it's his movement from being a nobody to being a somebody, and, since "a real man... [is] defined and recognized as one who was prepared to fight for Queen, Country and Empire" (Dawson 1), he would seem to have gained something of significance in his manhood and lost something less valuable in his life.

Guy's desire to "show up" in the story of his choice, and his difficulties in finding this story in real life are reflected in his relationships with Aphorpe and Ritchie-Hook. Perhaps more directly, these difficulties are manifested in the relationship between

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<sup>16</sup> The direct correlation between Tony's regiment and Mr. Crouchback's prayers is yet another example of the intersection between the trilogy's two higher powers, religious faith and military enterprise.

Brigadier Ben Ritchie-Hook and Apthorpe, with Guy as a kind of satellite observer. Like Guy, Apthorpe and Ritchie-Hook are intensely interested in maintaining and/or achieving some place in the war because the war represents a "celebration of national greatness [which is] simultaneously a celebration of national manhood" (Dawson 15). The key differences are in their initial positions and their approaches.

Apthorpe, like Guy, is a nobody who has never been able to show up, but who, like Guy, appears to have consumed several stories about what a soldier should be. The fact that "Apthorpe alone look[s] like a soldier" (*MA* 44) at the outset illustrates the degree to which he is concerned with looking the part he so desperately wants to play. Believing he knows the plot, he arrives in character, "burly, tanned, mustached [and] primed with a rich vocabulary of military terms and abbreviations" (*MA* 44). As Jeff Hearn has noted, and as the above treatment of nobility and notability suggests, "men are constructed through public visibility" (3), but Apthorpe's desire to *show* himself to be a man also illustrates a difficulty in accepting whatever might be going on at what we usually call "a deeper level."

Afraid to deal with this other level, unwilling to engage with "inner space" (Hearn 40), Apthorpe concentrates on the minutiae of military rhetoric and code as a means of affirming his place inside a structure which will, in turn, affirm his status as a man. Thus, it should not be surprising that only Apthorpe can explicate the elaborate method of piling arms which involves a process whereby

the odd numbers of the front rank will seize the rifles of the even numbers  
with the left hand crossing the muzzles, magazines turned outward, at the

same time raising the piling swivels with the forefinger and thumb of both hands. (*MA* 49)

Much more interesting is why he bothers to know it in the first place. Somehow tipped off that this is to be a war of pedantry, he arms himself with policy in an effort to find a place inside the "official view "

Indeed, insofar as he manages to embody the peevish, "vast uniformed and bemedalled bureaucracy" (*MA* 135), he is a figure of fun where the basic absurdity of the war is paralleled by the "fundamental implausibility" (*MA* 107) of Apthorpe himself. But, as William Myers notes, Apthorpe is not a wholly comic character. Instead, he carries "a manifest burden of personal unhappiness" (Myers 126) which is importantly tied to his deep misgivings about his own legitimacy as a man. Guy observes that "Apthorpe tend[s] to become faceless and tapering" (*MA* 107) the closer one gets to him and that there is difficulty in the passage between "Apthorpe's seemingly dreamlike universe and the world of common experience" (*MA* 107). The facelessness and the difficult passage indicate both the potency of Apthorpe's fictional world, and his preoccupation with what I have called showing up. He has no face and no presence in the real world and this humiliation initiates the move into a wholly imaginary plane. The dreamlike universe is, as Semple notes, "the universe of [Apthorpe's] own self-importance" (56), a universe where he is a primary rather than a secondary character<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Apthorpe, Trimmer and Ludovic together illustrate the persistent assertions of "minor characters" in the trilogy. In every novel, some seemingly incidental character comes very close to hijacking Guy's story and making it his own. This, I think, indicates both Guy's vulnerability as a main character and the seemingly universal need to be considered as primary in some kind of narrative.

This being the case, Apthorpe's desire to ingest the policy book, stand on inappropriate regulations and protect his gear represents a real anxiety about his own personal and intrinsic value. Acutely aware that he is not a hero and that he lacks the internal goods to be one, he obsessively accumulates outward markers to obscure his own shortcomings. Because his manhood is so important and it depends so much upon external markers, Apthorpe ends up accepting what Roger Horrocks has called the "cryptic message of masculinity, don't accept who you are" (Horrocks 25). The disassociation with self is so severe that, in the end, the military role is not simply added to the *real* Apthorpe; instead, there is no real Apthorpe at all. Whatever might have been there has been discarded as unnecessary and, in its place he creates a bogus family tree, an African bush legend and a public school history for himself because he is so terribly certain that what he really is isn't good enough.

Given the pronounced nature of both his fantasies and his insecurities, it is not surprising that, once he is promoted,<sup>18</sup> Apthorpe revels in the little power he has. He wants Guy to recognize him with a salute and Dunn to recognize his seniority because, for once, he is certain he has authority and legitimacy. This over-emphasis on the small measure of power he does have arises because "men... seek power as a substitute for a more confident feeling of authority" (Betcher and Pollack 116). When he challenges Dunn to a duel in morse code, he exhumes the archaic test of manhood more or less directly from the 18th Century where "the denial of respect due one's rank was one of the most

frequent causes for dueling" (Mosse 18). Having finally attained a rank, Apthorpe drags the old story of dueling (itself a codified method of affirming masculinity) into a new space and seeks "satisfaction" in both the older and some newer sense. In one sense, he wants to gain satisfaction *from* Dunn, but, probably more importantly, he wants to reach some level of comfort, some sense of rest relative to himself, through the obvious affirmation found in a clear victory in a publicly sanctioned contest. With an underdeveloped sense of self and an overdeveloped public persona, Apthorpe's primary avenue toward internal satisfaction runs through some external validation.

In this context, it is not unreasonable to view his obsession with his "gear" as some manifestation of what we more usually call "baggage" in the psychological sense. Unable to jettison any of this baggage, he seems to stockpile it instead.<sup>18</sup> He carries all kinds of unreasonable things around with him because he is so terrified of facing life as a single, solitary self. He *arrives* at his training with a little box "full of [stars] and of crowns" (*MLA* 156) because he believes that they, like the military jargon, have some mysterious (or probably not that mysterious at all...) power to finally make him a man. These little markers represent his desire to "compete for ... people's attention through the use of easily understood and transparent symbols" (Mosse 23), to be able to advertise his manhood rather than to have to prove it. Like a child with a gold star on his forehead, Apthorpe

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<sup>18</sup> Waugh specifically notes that "Mr. Churchill became Prime Minister" (*MLA* 175) on the day Apthorpe was promoted because he believed Churchill, like Apthorpe, was as internally vacuous and as much of a slum as Apthorpe, that both were the purveyors of superficially attractive half (or non) truths.

<sup>19</sup> In this habit, Apthorpe does not seem to be alone. John M. MacKenzie has noted the Victorian and Edwardian tendency to assert masculinity through particular, often exotic items. Speaking of the "collection mania of the period", MacKenzie says that exotic "horns and skins represent[ed] in their very

wants the stars on his shoulder to signal his significance because he feels "abused and unrecognized by modern society" (Horrocks 1).

With all of this dress-up and make-believe going on at the root of Apthorpe's vision of masculinity, it is telling that his inevitable demise is the result of some type of internal rot. When Apthorpe is eaten away from the inside in much more than a metaphoric sense, the reader sees the futility in attempting to effect internal change from the outside. He dies of something very similar to the Bechuchua tummy he presumably made up in the Halberdier barracks. The disease he made up, or something very like it, comes back to kill him because he doesn't have the constitution to resist the potent spells of language and story that construct his vision of manhood. And, whether these spells are fictional in the narrative sense, or simply delusional in the sense of his brain-fever or his drunkenness, the results are the same. He suffers and he dies. Having surrendered himself to visions, he finally lacks the internal fortitude to fight for himself. And, in the end, his surrender is nothing short of unconditional.

This said, there is a kind of backward consolation to be found in the circumstances of Apthorpe's death. His final exit does mark exactly the appearance he has so long and desperately desired. His funeral involves a "perfect" morning, pallbearers who are "exactly sized," the "Last Post in perfect unison" and several "rifles fired as one" (*MA* 245). He gets a soldier's death, even if he did miss out on most of the life part of it and, in a way, the "official" military funeral (where people he does not know do things he cannot

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inutility Western Man's dominance" (180). This is, of course, exactly the kind of dominance Apthorpe seeks.

hear or see in order to pay their highly codified respects) is a sort of metaphor for Apthorpe's whole life; it's a beautiful show without much consideration for what, or who, is inside the box or inside the body.

Apthorpe's sometime adversary, Ben Ritchie-Hook provides Guy with an alternate model of military manhood because he is so obsessively attached to what is going on *inside* a soldier's soul, or, more crudely, in a guy's guts. Unlike Guy and Apthorpe, Ritchie-Hook has been quite successful at asserting himself as a warrior (if not a rank and file soldier) and unlike Apthorpe, he has no time whatsoever for military bureaucracy. Rather than trying to hide inside and behind policy and forms, Ritchie-Hook is forever trying to escape the trappings of "bumf" (a term he introduces to the novel) and get to "biffing." For Ritchie-Hook, any overly formalized approach to military strategy distracts from the essential assertion of manhood he finds in fighting. As a result, his checkered military career reflects both the advantages of internal authority (he gets everything he has by doing what he feels, not what he's told) and the dangers of ignoring the overall storyline (he suffers everything he suffers because he refuses to acknowledge the higher powers who are at least attempting to manipulate him).

The Brigadier's seemingly contradictory résumé bears citation at length. He is the great Halberdier *enfant terrible* of the First World War: the youngest commander in the history of the Corps, the slowest to be promoted; often wounded, often decorated, recommended for the Victoria Cross, twice court-martialled for disobedience to orders in the field, twice acquitted in recognition of the brilliant success of his independent actions. (MA 66)

Of course, the above synopsis is not really very contradictory at all because of the consistencies that underlie it: Ritchie-Hook succeeds every time he is engaged in a test of his manhood and fails every time his sense of decorum and propriety are tested. Unlike Apthorpe, who is pathologically attached to the rulebook, "The Brig" feels certain that "an officer's worth does not consist of avoiding military offences" (*MA* 117) and he has the résumé to prove it. His lack of interest in "what are laughingly called the 'correct channels'" (*MA* 117) is the complete inversion of Apthorpe's consistent regard for regulations and arises precisely because he has what Apthorpe lacks, his manhood. Ritchie-Hook is forever in search of an expression of his manhood, not a mask for his uncertainties.

Because Ritchie-Hook has his manhood, his dilemma is not about attaining, but about keeping, something. He does not have to find what he is missing, just protect what he already has. And yet, his anxiety is at least as pronounced as Apthorpe's. The addendum to Ritchie Hook's list of achievements tells the reader that "the years of peace had been years of unrelenting conflict for [the Brigadier]. Wherever there was blood and gun-powder from County Cork to the Matto Grosso, there was Ritchie-Hook" (*MA* 66). These continuous battles suggest a great deal about Ritchie-Hook's system of value and illustrate his desire to participate in something Dawson has called "the popular masculine pleasure-culture of war" (Dawson 4) where the pleasure culture of war describes some internal pleasure men gain through conflict. While Apthorpe is trying to shore up his sense of legitimacy through the military and Guy is trying to pursue notions of honour, the Brigadier seems to be in pursuit of conflict of and for its own sake because it is such a



transparent assertion of masculinity<sup>20</sup>. As the pointlessness of his raid on Dakar indicates, he is motivated not by any holy sense of cause or crusade, nor by any mercenary sense of self-advancement (He knows his career won't benefit from any of these unauthorized adventures.). Instead, war (any war) *is* his cause such that he is not ever fighting to defend a vision of world, but rather actively participating in a vision of the world *while* fighting.

This distinction is important because the Brigadier is at once the trilogy's most bloodthirsty and unstable character and the greatest representative of life force. As the character with the surest sense of self in the trilogy (with the possible exception of Guy's father), he is fairly admirable, but the source of his certainty is so dubious that it calls the reader's admiration into question. When Ritchie-Hook shouts "Come on you blighters, shoot me" (*MA* 141), he shows a really dangerous disregard for self-preservation that might be viewed in terms of some kind of death wish except for the obvious sense of joy that's present when he plays "for some time, running, laughing, ducking, jumping until he [is] exhausted [but] unwounded" (*MA* 141). This expression of joy, the most intense and direct expression of happiness in the whole trilogy, arises because of "the stunning energy that war-time battles release[]" (*Mosse* 110)<sup>21</sup>. The difference is that this is *training* with his own side, not battle with the enemy; the odd result is that Ritchie-Hook gains happiness by making his day-to-day life *more* like a war-zone. His ability to transplant the

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<sup>20</sup> Rosen suggests that any excessive attachment to "acting like a man means suspecting one is not a man" (Rosen xvii). If this is so, then even Ritchie-Hook is not immune to "acting" as an expression of self. Still, *action* seems more significant to him than acting (in the Aphorpe sense) most of the time.

<sup>21</sup> *Mosse* credits this idea to Ernst Jünger's work in *Der Krieg als Inneres Erlebnis* (1922).

war-time energy into banal training exercises creates the uncommon thrill of defying death, which, in turn, asserts his presence. Along with Friedrich Schiller, Ritchie-Hook seems to believe that "only the soldier is free because he alone can look death in the face" (qtd. In Mosse 111), that the threat to his life expresses the essence of it, that his ability to dodge bullets is the one emphatic proof that he is alive: all of this together seems to assert his essential manhood.

Still, the Brigadier's efforts to express some essence of himself and to free himself from destructive and intrusive narratives are in the end unsuccessful. Despite his very different approach to life, Ritchie-Hook dies in a fashion reminiscent of Apthorpe's demise. His efforts to outrun narrative are finally unsuccessful, because, like everyone else, he is not the primary author of his own life.<sup>22</sup> After the débâcle at Dakar, Tickeridge tells Guy that the Brigadier will no longer be "in the picture" because Ritchie-Hook is "the wrong age" (*MA* 231); he goes on to say "You can be an *enfant terrible* or you can be a national figure no one dares touch. But the Brig's neither of those things. It's the end for him" (*MA* 231). What this means, basically, is that Ritchie-Hook is being written out of the story: "the end" means the same thing as THE END; it's time to close the book. And, even though Tickeridge is premature in his prediction (even though the Brigadier pops up in unexpected places throughout the war), he is correct in identifying the source, if not the instance, of Ritchie-Hook's demise.

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<sup>22</sup> Reed Robert Bonadonna suggests that the Brigadier's "secure identity ... is not at the mercy of whim or fate" (160), but it seems clear that Ritchie-Hook's death indicates that stable identity is no safeguard against narrative whim.

As Marston LaFrance has noted, Ritchie-Hook dies in a "battle" where the journalistic value of the event" (LaFrance 49) exceeds the military value. He dies serving an American journalist and at the same time (and incongruously) helping to cement political agreements for and with Communists. The great warrior does manage to die on the battlefield (he wishes the "bastards would shoot better" (*US* 289) because he does not want to go back home.), but he dies on a battlefield manufactured by fiction-mongers like de Souza and Kilbannock. His final achievement has precisely nothing to do with military targets, and everything to do with literary genres. His final achievement, dying, changes "the events of the day from fiasco to tragic drama" (*US* 289) and causes Kilbannock to conclude the two "classic stories of heroism" (*US* 289) he has encountered in the war involve Trimmer's success and the Brigadier's death. Neither has anything to do with winning the war, but the parallelism between Trimmer and the Brigadier is illuminating insofar as it shows how two completely dissimilar personalities can be reduced and/or elevated to the same status by selective narrative manipulation. A cipher like Trimmer (a shape-shifting hairdresser) and a man's man like Ritchie-Hook are finally the same to Kilbannock because he sees them as fictional markers and ignores the possible existence (and therefore divergence) of their internal motivations.

So, despite their differences, both Apthorpe and Ritchie-Hook die serving some fictional vision of their own manhood. Apthorpe sells whatever soul he has to buy the sham vision the military offers and Ritchie-Hook, ceaselessly protecting his manhood against the threat of "bumf and telephones," eventually dies in a newspaper battle. Both illustrate important things about Guy's quest for real manhood, and provide a useful set of

bookends in that they represent both a completely constructivist (in Aphorpe) and a completely essentialist (in the Brigadier) vision of masculinity.

But, by the very nature of their extremism, neither one of them has as complicated a vision of himself and his manhood as Guy does, because both have at least partially modified their quests for the masculine ideal. In Waugh's trilogy and elsewhere, the problems with masculinity are at least two-fold. First, because being "a little bit masculine" is not enough, the individual is invited to embody a sweeping "fantasy ideal [that is] not realizable" (Middleton 4). Second, the individual faces the problem of finding an arena in which to validate his masculinity. But because the ideal exists at the level of fantasy and the platform at the level of reality, because the ideal belongs to a fictional world and the individual belongs to the really real world, it is almost impossible to find a venue that can accommodate the whole mammoth idea of masculinity. As I have been trying to show, war is one of the platforms that comes closest to accommodating it, but, even here, some simplification of one's approach is necessary to achieve the image of success. Aphorpe, for example, concedes (to himself, if not others) that he is nothing in order to attain a few small stars of validity, while Ritchie-Hook becomes permanently attached to the single role of warrior, forsaking at least two of Gilmore's three injunctions for masculine legitimacy as embodied in the construction of "Man-the-Impregnator-Protector-Provider" (223).<sup>23</sup> These decisions are, to keep with the military motif, tactical. Each character gives something up to get something else. Aphorpe and Ritchie-

Hook abandon (or they are forced to abandon) the more complicated pursuit of true and complete masculinity and settle for some smaller portion of the overall vision.

The problem for Guy is that he is trying to maintain too much and surrender too little in his quest for idealized masculinity. At once a jaded middle-aged man and a innocent little boy, Guy seems unable to compromise his childish and absolute vision of manhood. And, not surprisingly (in this study anyway), this vision is essentially textual. One of Guy's most intriguing and revealing features is his obsession with the childhood adventure stories of Captain Truslove.<sup>24</sup> He joins the army seeking and expecting to find a kind of comic book heroism devoid of real life complications. Denied the "opportunity" to assert his manhood in the first War, Guy grows up with the sanitized and glamorized vision of warfare provided by Truslove and others. Having missed the real thing (which, presumably, would have disabused him of his romantic notions), he gets the officially sanctioned version of things, a version specifically designed to attract him with its transparent and simplified incentives toward personal validation, honour and the assertion of manhood.

George L. Mosse notes that for those who were

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<sup>23</sup> I say "at least two" because even the Brigadier's soldiering seems devoid of any sense of protecting something. As I have attempted to establish earlier, the Brigadier is not so much defending anything as he is asserting himself through violence.

<sup>24</sup> Although Waugh eliminated many of the Truslove passages in the single edition of *Sword of Honour*, they remain important both to the individual novels and to this particular project because of the specific intersection of masculinity and story.

too young to have fought [in WWI], reading war stories and looking at picture books stripped of the horrors of war, meant regret at having missed this great adventure and test of their manhood. (Mosse 114)

And, if this is true, it is not surprising that time has "advanced swiftly" (*MA* 19) for Arthur Box-Bender after having "served quite creditably" in the first war while "time [has] stood still" for Guy who, at thirty-five, still looks at himself "as a young man" (*MA* 19). Because Arthur has attained a real measure of masculine credibility through the war, his life has advanced. Without this validation, Guy has been unable to progress at all and still thinks of himself as young and unproven. It is not just coincidence that Box-Bender, an otherwise distasteful character, has all the things "a man should" want in his forties. Instead, it's a testament to his advanced stage of manhood, his ability to fulfill David Gilmore's three injunctions for masculinity. He has served his country, he has a wife, a family and a respected career. And, whatever one might think about what Arthur represents or what he is like, it is fairly clear that possessing all of these things (which Guy so conspicuously lacks) makes him one of the most self-satisfied and comfortable characters in *Sword of Honour*.

Because his pre-occupations are still with things like soldiering and comic books that "belong[] to extreme youth" (*MA* 19), "the enemy in the open" provides Guy with the opportunity to be transformed into a heroic figure through his involvement in the conflict. And, since "the spirit of [military] adventure and manliness [are] considered all but identical" (Mosse 113), achieving the status of soldier represents a significant step in re-starting the process of achieving the status of "man." But, unlike Apthorpe, who views

the war as a venue to salvage *something* from his life, Guy wants the war to gain him everything he has been missing. He doesn't want to gain part of his manhood, but all of it, and as a result any departure from the Truslove ideal is devastating to him. So, while Apthorpe is not bothered by any moral considerations about the Finnish defeat, Guy is sickened by the bare suspicion that "courage and a just cause [are] irrelevant to the issue" (*MA* 142). Because of his age, his status as cuckold, and his childlessness, Guy needs more from his war than a younger man like Arthur did from his. The aging Guy needs his war to be epic, while the young Arthur was able settle for "credible"; in the end, Guy's overzealous desire to fully participate in an idealized story of masculinity results in his inability to participate in any meaningful way whatsoever.

Guy's difficulties arise primarily because of his insistence on the presence of honour and his desire that "the modern world acknowledge that there's such a thing as right and wrong" (Crabbe 27). And, this problem comes fairly directly from the divergence between "officer" and "gentleman," two terms which Guy erroneously imagines as synonymous. His attachment to a storybook vision of war and its correlation to honour make it difficult for him to be a real soldier. Because his stories, like all stories, "discard [and overlook] massive quantities of material" (Hanne 8), Guy is dumbfounded by the enormous amount of "bumf" in his real life as a soldier. Instead of glory and honour, he finds that "reality is too terrible and too various to be accounted for by any simple myth, any easy pattern of heroics, no matter how splendid" (Bergonzi 35). Guy believes in gentlemanly ideals and thinks that the "gentleman [is] supposed to be the temple in which the abstraction called 'honour' dwelt" (Castronovo 19). But his reality is

more complicated than his stories. As a gentleman, he obviously wishes for peace and decency, but *also as a gentleman*, Guy clearly needs the war to attain his manhood. As Bonadonna notes, "[s]oldiering gives the gentleman the opportunity to recreate and enshrine the circumstances of his legitimacy and authority, and to convert failure into martyrdom" (97). Thus, while Jerome Meckier is surely correct in saying that Waugh's characters are "craving stability in spinning world" (168), he misses the simultaneous desire for some kind of enormous upheaval and the opportunities that might accompany it. Crudely, the "gentle" part of Guy's approach wants peace and civility, while the "man" needs war. The result is the bizarre kind of waiting game that Guy has so obviously been playing where he hopes for peace while at the same time and on some other level he hopes for some huge and hateful (*MA* 12) monster that might afford him a "place in the battle" (*MA*12).

Because of the simultaneous need for violence as proving ground and the restrictions against violence for the sake of indulgence, Peter Middleton's study of the relationship between comic book heroes and masculinity rightly notes that adventure plots invariably begin with bad guys doing something bad, not when good guys doing something good. Superman doesn't save kittens from trees: he waits for Lex Luther to try to destroy the world, then goes out and stops him. The point is that there isn't any *proactive* way to become a hero, just reactive. Middleton says:

Many action comics make justice a central mechanism in the plot. Crimes are committed by others and it is the duty of the superhero to bring them to justice. Their ability to become superheroes actually depends on... prior



transgression of the law. Their powers spring into life when the rule of law breaks down. (Middleton 29)

This is almost exactly what Guy is hoping for. Having been dormant for his entire life, Guy views the war as opportunity for his powers to "spring to life". He is, in Peter Schwenger's terms "like Clark Kent in being a creature of compromises and failures" (Schwenger 118), but, also like Clark Kent, Guy "takes comfort from the suggestion that this is merely a temporary role [that] his real identity is an inviolable core of pure masculinity" (Schwenger 119) that awaits an opportunity for expression.

This desire to think of one's real self as a blundering alter-ego and to hope for transformation is more or less directly indicated by Guy's reaction when the Brigadier says "Gentlemen, these are the officers who will command you in battle" (*MA* 136):

At those words Guy's shame left him and pride flowed back. He ceased for the time being to be the lonely and ineffective man-- the man he so often thought he saw in himself, past his first youth, cuckold, wastrel, prig-- who had washed and shaved and dressed at Claridge's, lunched at Bellamy's and caught the afternoon train; he was one with his regiment, with all their historic feats of arms behind him, with great opportunities to come. He felt from a head to foot a physical tingling and bristling as though charged with galvanic current. (*MA* 136)

Thus, Ritchie-Hook's invocation of the idea of both gentlemen and battle serves as a kind of verbal phone-booth for the "head to foot" transformation into SuperGuy. But, despite

the Brigadier's words and Guy's hopes, gentlemen and battle rarely coexist in Waugh's trilogy.

Guy's ambitious conception of the gentleman soldier rests on a supposition that links "courtesy and grace... good form and moral goodness" (Bonadonna 150) in such a way that the simple, vulgar aggression of the Brigadier, while admirable in terms of virility, is also poor form in terms of gentlemanly ideals. But, the contradiction Guy perceives in Ritchie-Hook's version of masculinity does not prompt him to re-examine his own quest, just to re-route it and refocus it onto a more specifically gentlemanly model: Ivor Claire. Predictably, the real-life Ivor also fails to fulfill Guy's imaginary vision. Indeed, if the example of Ivor Claire indicates anything, it is that gentlemen are no longer gentlemen. When Guy first encounters Ivor, a graceful rider from an established family, he considers Ivor to be "the fine flower" of his nation, the "quintessential England" and "the man Hitler had not taken into account" (*OG* 114). The fact that he is also a deserter reveals the flaws in Guy's perception of the war in general and honour in particular. Before he leaves, Ivor explicitly addresses the problem of individual honour relative to the interpretive strategies of his contemporary context. Directly invoking the out-moded idea of the duel, Ivor tries to suggest that honour "is a thing that changes" and supposes that "in the next war... it will be quite honourable for officers to leave their men behind" (*OG* 221). What this amounts to, I think, is a recognition that the same act can carry a different charge if the preoccupations of grand narrative are shifted. Abandoning his place in Guy's vision of things, the fine flower of England embraces the slippage of conventional ideals, and participates in the "universal misalliance" (Meckier 166) of the modern world. Guy's

hopes that Ivor would be "another pair of boots entirely" (*OG* 114) prove false because neither Ivor, nor the concept of honour itself seem to have any constancy. This signals nothing less than the collapse of the whole structure of Guy's approach to the military. His original desire that he might be transformed into something wonderful beyond himself finds its reverse when Ivor, the "temple" of gentlemanly ideals, the fine flower of England, is transformed and fitted into the aimless, traditionless vision Guy has been attempting to resist.

Still, despite this collapse, the desire to achieve true masculinity remains a strong impulse even though "succeeding" at this project is a dubious kind of achievement: dubious because satisfying the emotional and psychological imperatives to become a man also involves a new and different kind of stasis. Although Guy joins the army to combat a "dry and negative chastity" (*MA* 17) that is as much spiritual as it is sexual, seeking masculinity has its own drawbacks. Middleton says that real men experience "one main site of blocked reflexivity [in] emotion" (Middleton 3). Peter Schwenger says "self-consciousness undermines the masculine assertion" (Schwenger 14). Both of them suggest that manhood, even though it is the fulfillment of a deep emotional need, simultaneously involves a de-valuation and/or stultification of emotion. And, it is this injunction against addressing emotion in any direct fashion that gives rise to the pathological attempts at public recognition we see in Apthorpe and the disproportionate emphasis on action we find in Ritchie Hook. In both cases, and in Guy's as well, the inability and/or refusal to deal with spiritual deadness as an internal matter results in the difficult project of asking the external environment to provide each man with what he

needs. And, as I've tried to suggest, the external world, although it is proficient at producing and propagating narratives, is not particularly interested in conforming to the narratives demands of specific individuals.

As a result of all of this Guy spends a decade in limbo because he can't deal with his problem, and the world doesn't much care about it either. This limbo, characterized by an inability to act productively or decisively, fits almost exactly into Horrocks' description of what he calls "the deadened man."

The deadened man is not so much fragile as curtailed or reduced. He is able to survive by shrinking himself to safe proportions. He doesn't feel threatened because he doesn't risk anything, especially intimacy with others. (106)

Guy's refusal to take risks is evidenced in his decision to flee his country, his family and friends. In short, he flees the scene of the crime that is his own life, and, by moving to Italy, he spatially and figuratively denies any emotional presence from the day to day operations of his life.

Perhaps even more interesting than this "shrinkage," this shying away from family and friends, is the persistent nostalgia for childhood exemplified in Guy's comic book visions of the world. That is, even as he runs away from stable structures like nation, family and friendship, he continues to seek a kind of stability in comforting stories recollected from childhood. These fond recollections, like Arthur's about the war, arise because of the satisfaction that arises from successfully fulfilling a role. Guy feels fairly certain that he has satisfied the requirements of boyhood and so looks back upon it as a

"part of his life when he was psychologically secure" (LaFrance 24). Indeed, "nostalgia, particularly for the period of his own childhood, is a potent strain" (LaFrance 24) in people like Guy.<sup>25</sup> The combination of the shame at not being a real man together with the sanctions against expressing emotion directly cause Guy to seek an isolated, emotionless existence in his real and public life even as he continues to nurse romantic and hopeful visions in his internal (and therefore insignificant) life. The result is the schizophrenic mixture of hopelessness (illustrated in Guy's belief that he's "natural fodder" for cannons) and optimism (shown in his belief in transformation and redemption) that the reader finds everywhere in Guy's character. One corresponds to his adult life, while the other to his childish hopes; each represents a different phase in the development of his soul.

I realize, of course, that "soul" is not a solid concept in contemporary criticism, and that it might suggest a certain degree of traditionalism or even conservatism. Waugh's famous statement that "no good can come from public causes, only private causes of the soul" (qtd. in Stopp 46) is disquieting to many, and suggests a kind of social apathy that probably is not productive. Still, his explicitly spiritual account of the soul's development finds its clinical counterpart in Horrocks' belief in the necessity of some kind of "inner space" (40) in the healthy masculine psyche. Both Horrocks' argument and Waugh's trilogy suggest that some "good" might result from a turn away from "public causes". And, "turning away" seems to be the most one can hope for, as there is no clear

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<sup>25</sup> In the above citations, LaFrance is speaking more particularly about Waugh himself and places emphasis on Waugh as "ironist," but his contention that the ironist represents a "mental house divided

evidence that "the soul" has any power to control "the public," just that trying to ignore the public gives the soul a chance. At the close of the trilogy the real world is as chaotic as ever, and its stability is still very much in question. Bogus conclusions, by the Communists about Mrs. Kanyis being "the mistress of a British Liaison Officer" (*US* 305) and erroneous reports, by the Germans who think Ritchie-Hook's real death is a hoax, are still prevalent.<sup>26</sup> The difference is that Guy doesn't believe in any of them anymore. He stops looking for a grand stage on which to become a hero, and instead takes an extremely localized and idiosyncratic approach to heroism which has much more to do with goodness than it does with greatness.

This shift from trying to make a mark, however small, on the big world, to focusing on changes (and they can be big ones) in a smaller frame, is productive. And although Guy's two acts of goodness, accepting Virginia's child and attempting to save the displaced Jews, are not particularly successful (Virginia and the Kanyis die), they do have a type of merit that isn't primarily pre-occupied with results, but intent. As Guy's father repeatedly tells him, "quantitative judgments don't apply" (*US* 195) in matters of the soul. And, relative to things I am trying to establish here, the acceptance of some kind of soul is the significant thing, because the search for public recognition (particularly masculine recognition) *is* all about quantitative judgments; it is very much concerned with how many medals on the chest, how many women in the bed, how much money in the bank, etc. To

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against itself" (24) seems to invite direct applications to Guy in terms of my approach.

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, these conclusions are as wrong-headed as they could possibly be and reinforce the fundamental instability and the lack of external progress in the trilogy. Guy, the perennial cuckold and now guardian of an enemy's bastard, is anything but a lady's man, and Ritchie-Hook, considered by the enemy to be too

show the transition Waugh decisively places Guy's salvation in "something they'll laugh about in Bellamy's" (*US* 193). By accepting public humiliation as a mode of salvation, Guy participates in the development of his own soul; he creates the active "inner space" Horrocks finds so precarious in men.

And, this inner space also opens up the first possibility of some immunity to the corrosive power of grand narratives. No longer believing that the stories of Truslove are "more real" than his own real experiences, Guy explicitly rejects the fictional construction of masculinity by accepting his cheating ex-wife's illegitimate son, a move which is, in terms of the masculine tradition, an inexcusable sign of softness. He also rejects the world that is being constructed by Kilbannock, Grace-Groundling Marchpole and de Souza by withdrawing into the "Lesser Hall" (*US* 10) at Broome (the ancient family seat) and selling Castello Crouchback (the site of his most romantic and unproductive ideas). These small acts reflect a more subtle kind of bravery that (although generally unrecognized in narratives about men, war or nation) result in things turning out "very conveniently for Guy" (*US* 310). The long hopeless struggle for greatness fails, but the small, seemingly insignificant deeds, lead to a string of "convenient" occurrences that leave Guy with the companionship of a "good" woman, a family<sup>27</sup> and home, and perhaps most significantly, they leave him without the desire to participate in the public world that once occupied all

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valuable to lose in such a foolish battle, continues to produce a "vigilant [hunt] for one-eyed men" (*US* 288).

<sup>27</sup> *Unconditional Surrender* closes by saying Guy and Domenica have two boys of their own, but the single-edition of *Sword of Honour* leaves them with only Trimmer's child. In this single instance I, along with several other critics, express preference for the collected edition because it re-emphasizes the fact that quantitative judgments do not apply. The action of saving little Trimmer is to be read, in Kant's terms, as

of his attention. In the epilogue, when Arthur asks Guy if he ever comes to London anymore, the reader finds one of the few direct and unequivocal answers Guy has ever made. He says, quite simply, "I don't" (*US* 309). And, of course, he doesn't.

### **Rooms of One's Own: The Spatial and Narrative Dimensions of the Postcolonial Situation**

The satisfaction Guy seems to gain from withdrawing from society can and has been read by many critics as just another example of a pouty rich white guy going to his (large and well-decorated) room when the rest of the world "won't play nice," or, at least, will not play the way he wants it to. This is, in a way, exactly what he does, but, as most of us (from at least Virginia Woolf on down) recognize, it *is* nice to have a room to go to when everywhere else seems hostile, and I do not think it is such a terrible mark against Guy, Virginia, or us that they go and we go there when such a room is available.

I mention this because it locates a persistent problem in postcolonial discourse. The problem is that some postcolonial critics only want to talk about who has rooms, not why people want to hide in them. Paying too much attention to the room and the world surrounding it never gets us to the root of the problem, which is more precisely involved with why the world seems so inhospitable in the first place. This is where difficulties with the applications of postcolonial discourses intersect with the discussion of masculine narratives. My assertion is that Guy is in an essentially postcolonial *situation* even if he

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an end in itself: the presence of the other children suggests some kind of compensation for the earlier indignity which would, of course, run counter to the whole nature of Guy's breakthrough.



isn't wearing any of the typically postcolonial hats. Along with Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, I am attempting to look at postcolonialism as "a process rather than a structure" (213). What they mean, I think (and hope), is that colonization isn't so much a "what" as it is a "how" and a "why."

Further, I think too many postcolonial critics are stuck on the obvious and transparent structures, and begin using them as free substitutions for processes which are much more difficult to pin down. The reasons for this tendency are many and not at all unreasonable. Because of its obvious links with real suffering and pain, the practise of postcolonial criticism seems to be inextricably linked with notions of justice and injustice. As Andrew Gurr suggests, the term postcolonial "implicitly signifies a value judgment: that colonialism was a bad manifestation of power politics" (Gurr 1). And because the real, political instances of these injustices generally tend to take place along racial, financial or gender lines, there has been an understandable tendency to use gender, race and class as fixed signifiers, to focus primarily on structures. Because most of the really horrible structures were constructed by people who came from a certain place and looked a certain way, the people themselves have too frequently become synonymous with the structures. Instead of being vessels which *contain* variable human qualities, gender, race, and class begin to act as transparent indicators of the content of individual psyches and hearts. This leads to the "absurdities" Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin notice in statements like "nobody at the imperial centre can be marginalized" and "the whites are the colonizers and the blacks the colonized" (213).

This kind of emphasis on structure, on physical markers is distressing on a number of levels because it suggests that postcolonial critics are making the same kinds of stock value judgments (based on geographic position, skin colour etc.) that they are ostensibly trying to criticize as "bad manifestations" of the human spirit. The problem, I think, is that *talking* about postcolonial matters is good, productive, and desirable, but *being* in a postcolonial situation is not. And, as long as one's credentials for discussing these matters (and not coincidentally the legitimate targets of these discussions) are determined by structural concerns, there will always be an odd desire to *be* postcolonial even though, once one has been declared postcolonial, the discussion immediately (and understandably) turns to how difficult the postcolonial situation really is.

The result of this structural emphasis is that the struggle to stake out territory within the field of postcolonial discourse is often such that it would have impressed the colonizers themselves with its efforts to ward off integration and mixing with "outsiders." The "invidious and distasteful... beauty parade in which the competitors are made to press their claims to have been the most oppressed" (Moore-Gilbert 12) is as fundamentally wrong-headed as it could possibly be, and it is so essentially similar to the colonizer's original project of competing for territorial titles and deeds that it does nothing less than jeopardize the whole project of postcolonial criticism and postcolonial theory.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I will not be importantly engaging the debate between the value of post-colonial theory (derived from French "high" theory) and postcolonial criticism (focused upon "real" political action), although I address parts of it (Characteristically, both sides question the legitimacy of each other) only insofar as Waugh seems to satisfy the dictates of one or both sides.

To avoid these problems, I have, as the first few sections of this chapter indicate, been attempting to focus on the negotiation between internal and external worlds. I am at least as interested in how external markers are processed as I am in the markers themselves. In this approach I follow Ashis Nandy who says that "the most dangerous and permanent" problems in colonialism involve "the inner rewards and punishments [and the] psychological gains and losses from suffering and submission" (Nandy 3) under foreign rule. A closer attention to psychological concerns makes it possible to avoid blanket judgments and to attempt to address some less-obvious psychic realities as they interact with the sort of political realities outlined above.

Further, attention to colonial states of mind also makes it possible to get outside the consideration of the moral validity of any given power structure or any given nation, and instead get to the psychological effects these systems have on characters. Indeed, stock assumptions about nations, like stock assumptions about individuals, seem more appropriate to colonizing efforts than efforts to deconstruct them. Noting the ways in which "separatist appeals for nationhood [were and] are generally regarded as symptoms of political illegitimacy" (Gandhi 103), Leela Gandhi disdainfully notes that one of the fundamental features of the colonial presence is the view that "some nations are 'good' and progressive [while] others are 'bad' and reactionary" (Gandhi 103). That postcolonial discourse should fall victim to the same approach (though, of course with the moral roles reversed) is, of course, another major problem.

In part to highlight the problems of these approaches, and in part to illustrate the pervasiveness and significance of the postcolonial dilemma, I posit Waugh's later work in

general and the trilogy in particular as postcolonial.<sup>29</sup> Because Guy's structural position is so antithetical to the expressed and unexpressed political and social purposes of the kinds of post-colonial critics I have outlined above, a consideration of the *Sword of Honour* as a postcolonial work *requires* the critic to move beyond simple markers and into some more complicated areas. Thus, I posit a rich, bigoted, backward-gazing white male (Guy or Evelyn, take your pick...) in the colonial position in a fashion akin to, but much more involved than, Dennis Walder's call for a similar treatment of T.S. Eliot whose "conservatism, antisemitism, and misogyny are well... known" (Walder 99). I say my position is much more involved (or much less involved from another perspective), because Walder, although he is making an unusual case for Eliot, still uses a fairly standard defense in relying on Eliot's "postcolonial" credentials as someone who was the child of northerners, raised in the American South, then transplanted back to the north, before moving to England.

My case for Guy Crouchback makes no such claims. Instead, I borrow from Fanon and others to view colonization as something which takes place on the threshold between an individual and his/her environment.<sup>30</sup> My assertion is, quite simply, that Guy cannot *find* the England he has been raised to live inside, and, when he cannot find it, when he instead encounters a whole set of alien values, he is given the classic colonial options of

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<sup>29</sup> I say Waugh's work because I will attempt to avoid confusion between "who" is postcolonial and what work has postcolonial tendencies and/or postcolonial significance. Still, the framing of this argument will take into consideration that it is primarily Waugh, not his characters, that some postcolonial critics really hate.

<sup>30</sup> Fanon himself has, at other times, viewed colonialism in terms of fairly well-defined racial structures, and would not, I think, accept some of the extensions I posit here. This said, his framework, does provide a strong rationale for the position I am trying to pursue.

living life as an unrecognized entity (alone and alienated) *or* attempting to acquire these new values (à la Kilbannock or Ivor Claire) no matter how distasteful and damaging they seem. This is almost identical to Fanon's assessment of the colonial mindset in Tunisia when he writes:

If psychiatry is the medical technique that proposes to enable the human being no longer to be a stranger in his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently alienated in his own land, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization. (TAR 53)

What he is saying is that "depersonalization," the absence of a true self, arises because one is a stranger in his own material circumstances.

The question for Guy, like the question for Fanon's Arabs,<sup>31</sup> is how to deal with this strangeness. The answer Fanon posits, unavailable to Guy and all but a few of the Arabs, is in the establishment of a kind of alternate culture. As indicated in the introduction, the day hospital Fanon and Geronimi created was expected to be "transformed into a society with its own multiplicity of relations, duties, and possibilities so that patients can assume and fulfill functions" (Fanon and Geronimi 715). By creating a mini-culture that maintained rather than erased the individual's personhood, Fanon believed the colonized subject could deal with psychological problems. In Fanon's view, the psychic pressures the colonized individual feels arise precisely because the "outside" culture seems so foreign and unstable relative to his/her own values and his/her own

community; therefore, some space is needed in which to practise those "relationships" which seem stable, recognizable, and comforting.<sup>32</sup>

The problem for Guy is that there is no community practising his values. A "gentleman" member of a family that was "until quite lately rich and numerous" (*MA* 17), Guy is in a position where he is likely the last of his line, both in terms of his own lineage and the whole gentlemanly class. Indeed, Bonadonna sees the trope of the "last gentleman" (96) as one that has increased "in the course of... historical development" (96). In this sense, Guy is a kind of endangered species, something explicitly noted in *Officers and Gentlemen* with the observation that "all gentlemen are now very old" (*OG*186). The irony, of course, is that Guy is not very old at all, it's just his way of life that is.

Aware that he is out of his own element in the real world (which belongs to Virginia and others who, because they lack tradition of any kind, are able to "go with the flow"), Guy attempts to find sustaining space through some inclusion in the time-honoured traditions of warfare. With his family name, and family home tapering out, Guy attempts some link with Roger of Waybroke and other heroes in order to find a stable position for himself. His happiest times (excluding, presumably those that take place between the end and the epilogue of *Unconditional Surrender*) are in Halberdier barracks because their

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<sup>31</sup> Again, it is important to be as clear as possible that I am not suggesting that the *degree* of Guy's suffering in Modern England equals, or even really approaches, the suffering of Fanon's Arabs (or other officially colonized peoples). I am only suggesting that the *type* of problem is very nearly the same.

<sup>32</sup> I say "seem" because, as I have been trying to show, the values themselves are likely to be manufactured, and, as I have also been trying to show, there is a great deal of doubt as to whether the old ones were much better than the new ones. Still, despite the contingent nature of the values, the loss the individual feels in their absence is very real.

continuous habitation signals stability and permanence in a radically unstable environment. This is Guy's attempt at something like Fanon's day hospital, his effort to re-assert his way of life in the shadow of what he believes to be alien forces.

When Guy perceives that the war does not maintain the values he hopes it will, he becomes an exile in his own country because his "home," the place where recognizable systems of relationships sustain the psyche, has been hijacked by those who are lacking his sense of certain "inarguable principles" (McCarthy 3), the most prominent and significant of which is honour. And without these principles, modern England is inclined to express itself "resentfully in random acts of destruction" (McCarthy 3), the most prominent and significant manifestations of which are evident in the war.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the chaotic way in which Waugh presents the war, the sense of "universal misalliance" the reader finds everywhere in the trilogy, is an expression of the colonized individual's view of the foreign order. Guy doesn't make sense of the contemporary world because, as colonial subject, he can't allow it to make sense; he can't allow it to make sense because one of the its very first principles involves the eradication of Guy and everything he stands for.<sup>34</sup>

I began this section by referring to Guy's withdrawal from society and the suggestion that such an action might be interpreted as something like petulance. I will conclude it by suggesting that it represents little other than a colonial subject's refusal to submit to the demands of the colonizer. Like his refusal of the masculine stereotype,

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<sup>33</sup> Again, I do not wish to validate Waugh's assessment of either the randomness or insidiousness of democracy (or the working class), nor to call WWII a random act, just to show how such a position can and has been developed.

Guy's refusal to go to London (the "Headquarters" of all the bad directions) shows an ability to resist the demands of the colonizer. Jock McCulloch says that "the cultural withdrawal of the African from the colonial presence... displays a positive aspect. The retreat... into the narrow confines of... home ... represent[s] a major strength" (127). In both Guy's and the African's case, the withdrawal is not so much about running away as establishing the pre-eminence of the space which sustains their own system of relations. As a colonial subject, Guy is particularly lucky to be *able* to curtail his interactions with the outside world (He doesn't need to go out and work for a boss who is going to disparage him and all he stands for), but ability and desirability are two different things. And, the difference between the available actions for Guy and the colonized African does not change the fact that they want exactly the same things, to find a place to exist and practise their most important senses of self and value. Or, put in the terms outlined above, the processes, if not the structures of colonialism exist in both cases.

I have attempted to prove three things in this chapter. First I have attempted to show that stories can and do control realities (literary and otherwise) and to contest "the deep-rooted conception that narrative simply expresses an identity that really exists, independently of its representation" (Dawson 15). Instead, and this is the chapter's second major point, I suggest, along with several others, that the "masculine ideal" is a type of narrative construction, derived from written and unwritten stories that, despite its fictional and contingent status, becomes the dominant force in some men's lives. The

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<sup>34</sup> Note the casual way in which Kilbannock, a member of Guy's community who has presumably "gone native" informs Guy, that people like him are "last war stuff" that "won't do" in the new cultural climate.



impossibility of actualizing this identity on a realistic plane becomes problematic because of the negotiation between "a shifting... world and a restrictive and dysfunctional sense of role" (Rosen xiii). The third point involves this negotiation insofar as Guy's strict sense of his role as honourable gentleman is debilitating in a world which has shifted from one set of narrative principles to another. The assertion about postcolonialism is that Crouchback lives in an England which, as far as he can see, has essentially colonized, or perhaps even cannibalized, itself. The value systems that he encounters are (nearly) as foreign to him as any "true" colonizing force might be in Africa, the West Indies, or anywhere in the Americas.

This chapter has attempted (and those that follow will continue this process) to locate and trace a set of narrative and psychological processes in order to show that the really interesting possibilities in postcolonial criticism and theory do not lie in assigning values to various "powers" but in addressing the psychic crises that arise when *anyone* attempts to make sense of (in these cases) his life when no one and nothing important seems to share his essential vision of what is good and valuable. By attempting to show the contingent ways in which both internal and external values are created, I have attempted to avoid the usual moral pitfalls and deal directly with the nexus between internal and external realities. In this approach, postcolonial criticism isn't about the structural features, but the psychological ramifications of dealing with structure. Crudely, it's not about figuring out what *kind* of brick is in the wall; it's about what it does to your head if you keep running into it. And, whether the barriers are material or psychological, real or fictional, the scars tend to be of much the same variety.

## **Chapter Two**

**Sam Selvon: Masculinity, Community and the Narrative Impulse**

This chapter, a study of Sam Selvon's "Moses trilogy,"<sup>1</sup> attempts to extend many of the concerns of the previous chapter in terms of the three essential and interrelated foci of the study as a whole: i) the role of narrative and/or fiction in the lives of characters, ii) the degree to which narrowly constructed stories of masculinity can interfere with a character's ability to perceive and/or pursue several viable visions, even versions, of himself, and, iii) the degree to which current approaches to postcolonial literatures might be similarly narrow and rigid when they attempt to determine in advance the proper and important features of "real" postcolonial texts.

To many, the issue of what constitutes a real postcolonial text is a complicated one, which involves, at the very least, some consideration of history and ethnicity. Increasingly, it also involves issues to do with gender and class.<sup>2</sup> In almost every case, some type of marginality is forwarded as postcolonial credential, and, although I hope to have already established the view of postcolonial discourse which informs this study, it is probably necessary to recognize the variety of approaches to postcolonial matters before making particular arguments about the postcolonial handling of Selvon's work. The nature of the postcolonial position has been the subject of both complex theoretical and reductive essentialist arguments, both of which, at times, seem to argue for the same thing. Whether characterized in the elusive terms of linguistic networks of signification, or in the

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<sup>1</sup> The trilogy includes *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), *Moses Ascending* (1975), and *Moses Migrating* (1983).

<sup>2</sup> One of the most famous investigations into these matters is, of course, Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" See, for example, Werner Sollors' article, "Who is Ethnic?" Gareth Griffiths' "The Myth of Authenticity," and Margery Fee's "Who Can Write as Other?"

more direct terms of racial identity. "postcolonial" is a term which seems, in terms of practical usage, to apply to texts *not* written by or about European white men.<sup>3</sup> Despite their many important differences, writers as disparate as Jean Rhys, V. S. Naipaul, Alice Walker, Chinua Achebe, and Nadine Gordimer can be expected to appear on a conventional postcolonial reading list; Evelyn Waugh, I think, cannot. But, as previously suggested, such an approach to postcolonial matters, based on oppression in a broad sense, runs into methodological difficulties because various visions of oppression are not always compatible with each other. Although commonly considered postcolonial, novels such as *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Color Purple*, for example, share almost nothing in terms of aesthetics or politics, and the positions each book posits can be seen as compromising (rather than complementing) the other if one thinks of each work only in terms of oppressors and victims, heroes and villains, problems and solutions.

Such dissimilarities might be expected to promote a wider vision of postcolonial matters, one which would accommodate a great deal of internal difference; instead, they sometimes lead to uneasiness and a desire to move back to the solid ground of recognizably progressive political enterprises, of universally acknowledged positions the reader affirmed *before* s/he got to the individual work. Ania Loomba notes that "in practice it *has* been notoriously difficult for contemporary cultural theorists to pay equally nuanced attention to both [the] socio-political and psycho-sexual aspects of human existence" (148), and the understandable desire to avoid this difficulty has, perhaps, made

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<sup>3</sup> Like a description of poetry as "writing where the words don't reach the end of the line," such a characterization of postcolonial thinking works because of the contradictions it avoids, not the descriptive

both straightforward visions (ones that avoid bothersome complications) and abstracted visions (ones that don't deal with them directly) more attractive. The fierce debate between "active" postcolonial critics and "passive" postcolonial theorists reflects the degree to which this is so. And, while it is obvious that a number of individual critical essays *do* try to contend with the complexities of these problems, the overall practise of postcolonialism has not yet transcended the simplistic terms outlined above. "In the classroom," Loomba notes, "the 'postcolonial' functions in... formulaic and reductive terms" (xv).

It is my contention that the limited body of critical work on Selvon is indicative of such reductive and formulaic approaches to postcolonial texts.<sup>4</sup> As one of the writers one might expect to see on a postcolonial syllabus (and one that wouldn't be expected on any other type of syllabus), Selvon, a non-white, non-professional, immigrant from the Trinidad, is situated squarely inside the conventional understanding of what it means to be a postcolonial writer. As a result, he has been handled in conventionally postcolonial

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content it includes.

<sup>4</sup> The limited amount, and the generally low quality, of criticism on Selvon does, in fact, reflect a problem in postcolonial discourse which is more easily overlooked in the large amount of material on writers like Naipaul, Gordimer, or, in the case of chapter four, Coetzee. For this reason, Selvon's limited critical oeuvre represents a manageable case-study, demonstrating, in a bare-bones fashion, the problematic role of "determinant oppressions" in some kinds of postcolonial thought. And, as the fourth chapter indicates, larger critical projects (like the one surrounding Coetzee) do not correct these problems; they just institutionalize and disguise them in different ways. Indeed, the critical hierarchy that builds up around certain writers and, more problematically, certain theorists, might suggest that postcolonial discourses are, in fact, reinstituting the divide between some kind of "ivory tower" approach to (postcolonial) texts going on in the upper echelons of academia, and the more pervasive practices which operate in less-conspicuous settings. Despite their status as the "Holy Trinity" (Moore-Gilbert 152) in some critical circles, the relevance of the work of Said, Spivak, and Bhabha has been questioned by others, including Aijaz Ahmad and Benita Parry. While my own conception of postcolonialism is not directly involved with this dispute, I *do* think that Selvon's case is representative of some of the more pervasive and subtle problems inside postcolonial discourse.

ways, ways which run counter to the specific nature of Selvon's fictional project. Crudely, conventional postcolonial treatments of Selvon tend to *mimic*, rather than critique, colonial practices. Such treatments overlook the complexity of an existing system (a nation or a text) because of an overdeveloped interest in a single aspect of that system. While the colonial regime considered colonial spaces in terms of certain rare or raw materials, some postcolonial critics seem to treat complex works of art (like Selvon's) exclusively in terms of a certain pre-existent, reductive set of preoccupations, and the sense that this is some kind of critical plundering is difficult to ignore or resist. Although his friend Austin Clarke insists that Selvon "was not interested in ... sociological and racialistic dissection" (42) of culture, and although Wayne Brown sees Selvon as "the least racially distressed writer of his generation" (35), most critics who bother to think about Selvon do so with reductive sociopolitical and racial accounts.<sup>5</sup>

My effort to situate Selvon next to Waugh is, in some fashion, designed to demonstrate the dubious assumptions inherent in such accounts, and to demonstrate that reductive visions of postcolonial discourse do a disservice to "authentic" postcolonial writers like Selvon, not just "hypothetical" ones like Waugh. In order to prove this point, it is useful to emphasize some important similarities between Selvon's approach and Waugh's. Establishing a connection between these two writers should, I hope, also suggest the possibility of a new and greater degree of flexibility inside their individual

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<sup>5</sup> Even in the small body of Selvon criticism, there are exceptions. Both Brown and Kenneth Ramchand have expressed similar, if much more understated, concerns about the nature of critical approaches to Selvon. Roydon Salick's new study, although limited by many of the problems outlined above, does at least suggest the possibility of some more sensitive approaches to Selvon.

discourses. By aligning them with each other, I hope to somehow align certain aspects of the "old school" (represented by Waugh) with certain aspects of the "new school" (represented by Selvon) in order to suggest that both the schools and the texts studied within them are closer together than many critics might suppose.

One of the more important similarities shared by both schools is intolerance. And, while the old school's shortcomings in the field of generosity are well known and widely accepted (largely because the new school has been so effective in elucidating them), the new school's intolerance is a much more subtle and elusive creature, one which hides in the unlikeliest of places and hurts some unlikely people. One of these people, I believe, is Sam Selvon. He is hurt, I think, because of the "ideological intolerance" (Brown 38) inherent in some of the self-consciously "progressive" positions of his critics. Because his critics are preoccupied with postcolonial discourse, they overlook all aspects of his work which might be "irrelevant to the anti-colonial struggle" (Brown 38). The trouble is that so much of Selvon's trilogy falls into this category, that so many of the really great moments in Selvon's fiction are *not* occupied with conventionally postcolonial matters. Preoccupied with the macrostructures of global political systems, Selvon's critics miss most of the important details that make his fictional world as peculiar and valuable as it is. In so doing, they tend to take the "literary" aspect out of literary criticism, and participate in a kind of "literary criticism that consists of sociocultural explications" (Ramchand 225) and not much else.

Such politically-oriented approaches are, of course, a long way from the strictly aesthetic preoccupations of some modernist critics, and so it is not surprising that no

existing study posits any serious links between Waugh and Selvon. The mental, philosophical and, to a lesser degree, chronological chasms which separate Waugh's modernism from Selvon's postcolonialism are so substantial as to almost obscure the important facts that Moses Aloetta and Guy Crouchback are very nearly contemporaries in London and that *The Lonely Londoners* is actually an older book than *Unconditional Surrender*. And, while it would be wrong to call Waugh and Selvon, or Moses and Guy, true contemporaries because both the writers and their characters intersect at such different points in their lives and their careers, the fact that they intersect at all is important in establishing a more fluid relationship between the discourses they seem to represent.

The postwar London that the reader encounters in *The Lonely Londoners* seems to be exactly the same place Guy Crouchback left at the end of Waugh's trilogy. From a strictly logical perspective, this should not be very surprising since it *is* the same city: the same place at almost exactly the same time. This said, the chronological and spatial similarities are less significant than their atmospheric counterparts. The reader recognizes Waugh's London not on the calendar or on the map, but in the description of London as "some strange place on another planet" (LL 7) in the very first paragraph of *The Lonely Londoners*.<sup>9</sup> The strangeness that Moses encounters is essentially similar to the strangeness Guy encounters in Waugh's trilogy; both characters attempt to find some stable, sensible system of value in a city which seems intent on thwarting such efforts. Mark Looker has rightly pointed out that "there is no seeing things steadily and seeing



them whole" (63) for Selvon's rootless bachelors, and, in the absence of stability and wholeness, characters are forced to deal with some wild fluctuations in their individual and collective fortunes: these fluctuations in turn give rise to ruptures in the individual's ability to perceive and understand his reality, and this lack of perception undermines his ability to separate the necessary from the unnecessary, and the contingent from the absolute. Under such conditions, individuals are left exposed to several destructive narrative manipulations of the truth, and, at another level, to manipulations of their whole perception of themselves.

Such manipulations are commonplace in both Waugh's and Selvon's fictional world. By the second page of *The Lonely Londoners*, the narrator (apparently a quick learner) seems to have absorbed a lesson it took Kilbannock six hundred pages to teach Guy when he accepts that "newspaper and radio rule this country" (*LL* 8). But, while this recognition is extremely valuable, it belongs to a third person narrator and takes place in some liminal position between text and reader, not inside the fictional reality itself. In the Moses trilogy, a clear-headed understanding about how artificially constructed signals can "rule" reality might be possible from an omniscient perspective, but the characters who live all the way inside the text (which is to say all the way in the fictional world) have a harder time separating things out. Indeed, the struggles to escape manipulation and to assert selfhood are at the very centre of all three books, and these struggles can be viewed

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<sup>20</sup> Selvon also comes very close to describing one of Waugh's characters when he writes about the "bags of old geezers who does be pottering about ... like if they lost, a look in their eye as if the war happen unexpected and they still can't realize what happen to the old Brit'n" (*LL* 59).

as a fairly straightforward effort to escape the status of "character" inside someone else's dizzying narrative and to gain the ability to narrate one's own life.

### **The Forms of Masculine Narrative: Problems of Stability and Choice**

This struggle for narrative power is, of course, an incredibly difficult one because manipulations of the Kilbannock type are everywhere in the Moses trilogy. And, although Moses and the boys are subject to different types of narratives than Guy is, they find narrative to be an equally formidable adversary. Like Guy, Moses and his friends are unattached, single men involved in constant negotiations with the disturbing carnival that makes up London's reality and, like Guy, their most psychologically successful moments come when they are able to construct some type of meaningful framework in place of this carnival, when they are able to find and/or establish some more stable space in which to make some more important and productive connections.

Like Waugh's protagonist, Moses is both a devotee and an unwilling prisoner of narrative disjunctions. Although he knows, and sometimes laments, the fact that the truth is difficult to locate, he can also be seduced into participating in the construction of dubious narrative realities. Like Guy, who knows that his world is governed by signals which are contradictory if not plain false, Moses understands that London is a chaotic and dangerous place to be. But such knowledge does not provide him with any real opportunity for escape, and he must, despite what he may or may not know, continue to carve out his existence relative to the world that surrounds him. The demands of

surviving in such a climate tend to undermine the individual's sense of the truth. The result is that Moses and Guy end up unable or unwilling to resist manipulation, and they frequently find themselves (wittingly and unwittingly) perpetuating the structures and approaches that seem to do them both a great deal of harm.

When a reporter approaches Moses and asks him if he has just arrived from Jamaica, Moses "don't know why but he tell the fellar yes" (LL 12). And, although "Moses don't know a damn thing about Jamaica" (LL 12), he goes on to give a completely fabricated account of what happened to him during a recent hurricane in that country. Here, Moses participates in the proliferation of misinformation in the city even though he is acutely sensitive to the fact that "the English people believe that everybody who come from the West Indies come from Jamaica" (LL 12). He becomes a kind of minor league Kilbannock figure despite the fact that most of his life is spent trying to find order and stability in a world that is too chaotic for him and for his friends. He does this because his desire for narrative presence overrides his need for truth. Perhaps more importantly, he does not even seem to recognize the diminished "truth value" of what he has been saying. When the reporter abruptly departs, Moses laments the loss of "a good chance to say his mind [because] he had a lot of things to say" (LL 13). The fact that "his mind" has so far taken the form of pure fabrication does not even seem to register to Moses because he is too preoccupied with securing his place in the paper, in a news-story which would, in some small fashion, reconfigure his narrative identity.

This being the case, the fabrication is far from idle, and the feeling of loss is real. Although he is making up the story, Moses *does* have something to say, and it is this

intermingling of pure fabrication and deep personal desire that causes crisis in Moses' life and the lives of many of Selvon's characters in the trilogy.<sup>7</sup> In Moses' world, a fictionalized message can retain all of its emotional force in spite of, or sometimes even because of, its factual illegitimacy. There is a consistent confusion about, or lack of distinction between, the qualities one experiences and encounters *inside* oneself and the self one projects onto and absorbs from his surroundings, and this confusion makes it possible for Moses to be both a fictional character (insofar as he is a Jamaican hurricane survivor) and a real person (insofar as he is a Trinidadian living in a Bayswater basement) at the same time. The lack of differentiation between story and real worlds allows him to be both an artificial product and an authentic article.

Thus, Moses is not a real Kilbannock figure even though he shares the latter's preference for a good story over a true tale. They are different because Moses does not usually delight in the manipulation of truth for its own sake; he just wants recognition so badly that truth never seems to occur to him in the first place<sup>8</sup>. He is not divorced from truth so much as he has never been properly introduced to it. Unlike Guy who consciously understands and articulates what he wants from the world and how he wants the world to be, Moses is without a firm set of absolute principles with which he hopes to govern his life. If Guy's conflict is essentially one in which one set of values comes into conflict with another set of values (or, rather an entire ethos which opposes value), Moses'

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<sup>7</sup> Consider, for example, the cases of Galahad and Bob, both whom develop pathological attachments to imaginary visions of themselves which closely correspond to character types derived from grand narratives.

<sup>8</sup> The obvious exception to this involves Moses' seemingly unprovoked mischief with Lewis, whose marriage Moses destroys by constructing a narrative that undermines Lewis' confidence in his wife.

search seems to be for value itself, for a way of finding meaning and substance in London life. And, at a much more important, if slightly hokey, level, this is also a kind of search for himself, an effort to infuse real value into a life he often fears will “just vanish without a ripple or a blink” (*MM* 19).

The problem for Moses and his friends is that their search for substance is not as discriminating as it could be because they are unclear about the specifics of their own vision of value. The lack of a well-defined model makes all models seem viable and makes them prone to several different forms of counterfeit. As a result, they are particularly vulnerable to the wide variety of “conceptual contradictions and inconsistencies” (Schoene-Harwood xi) inherent in the epic vision of masculinity. And, while the *Sword of Honour* trilogy is primarily about the difficulties found in *altering* a deeply ingrained vision of the world, about shifting from one kind of story to another one, Selvon's Moses trilogy is often about filling a kind of emotional or psychological void, or at least clearing enough space so that the void can be confronted directly. While Guy's rigidly held beliefs take a series of beatings, Moses and the boys are searching for something in which to believe.

Predictably, this search leads them into a series of one-sided negotiations with their own masculinity. Anson Gonzalez correctly notes that, for many of Selvon's characters, “their search for identity is usually merged with their desire to assert their masculinity” (47), but this merger is incredibly complicated and far from seamless. Amidst all the chaos and uncertainty that makes up immigrant life in London, the boys do seem to zero in on a number of significant masculine signposts insofar as they are preoccupied with procuring

sex, money, property, prestige and power. But, despite this common preoccupation, they tend to be really uncertain and really divided about what they should actually *do* with their lives. Clifford Geertz's work suggests that symbols and images can "become public... entities against which people match their own experience" (Looker 71), but, for Selvon's characters, there is a lag or a breakdown between imaging and action because the overly vivid images fail to provide any clues about how they are to be actualized.<sup>9</sup> The result is a highly imagined life, but a hesitantly lived one.

Although the preoccupation with masculinity is evident in Moses and in most of his friends, their approaches tend to differ a great deal. They all want to achieve "super-maleness" (Gonzalez 46), but there is no clear consensus on where to start or how to travel because masculinity tends to exist only as an all-or-nothing construction. One of the features of the masculine ideal is that it is both contradictory and absolute in its authority. The result is that it is both impossible to fulfill and impossible to contest. We don't say "Bob's a little bit masculine," or "John's mostly masculine," because any serious qualification amounts to complete nullification. And, because this is so, self-consciously masculine individuals must be wary of well-defined, programmatic efforts to upgrade their "masculinity quotient" because such efforts tacitly admit to some present deficiency.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Looker is not specific about exactly what part of Geertz's thought suggests this idea, but the fourth chapter of *The Interpretation of Cultures*, "Religion as a Cultural System," recognizing as it does that "a system of symbols... acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men" (90) seems, broadly speaking, to mesh with both the parameters of this study as a whole, and with Looker's more specific articulation.

<sup>10</sup> As suggested in the previous chapter, war is a clear exception to this rule insofar as it provides clear opportunities for masculine upgrades without the necessity of admitting to any pre-existent deficiency.

But, if they cannot go after masculinity, neither can they just let it go. In the Moses trilogy, the result of this combination is the stop-start set of scattered and disjointed efforts we find when characters pick up some type of real world project (which might be just about anything: winning the lottery, getting white women, becoming an Englishman, or writing a book) as a way of closing the gap between the world in which they live and the world they imagine. The scattered nature of their efforts reflects the multifaceted nature of their failures. Without money, property, or (recognizable) progeny, the boys have satisfied almost none of Gilmore's criteria for true manhood, and they do not seem to know where to start their rehabilitation. Instead, they pick up, then drop, a series of projects in the desperate hope that success in any one area might lead to success in others, while, at the same time, they feel compelled to pretend that they have everything under control, that they are in need of nothing at all.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Moses' defeatist position that "the black man cannot unite" (*MA* 42) is specifically informed by the fact that he has "seen various causes taken up and dropped like hot coals" (*MA* 42), that he has witnessed numerous projects and watched them "scatter like when you pitching marbles" (*MA* 42). This fragmentation results from an unwillingness to accept the humiliation of the starting position. To use the lingo of the self-help seminar, the boys

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<sup>11</sup> Examples of this type of behaviour are too many to list comprehensively, but consider, for example the narrator's description of arrivals in London: "From the very beginning they out to give you the impression that they liep, that they on the ball, that nobody could tie them up" (*LL* 22). This desire to appear stable and collected is contrasted by a constant sense of need and flux: "It ain't have a night that [Cap] not coasting down the Bayswater, or drifting round by the Circus" (*LL* 34). "Big City enter the pools every week" (*LL* 80). Despite "vowing to go back to Trinidad" (*LL* 124), "everyone cagey about saying outright that... they will go back to them green islands in the sun" (*LL* 122). Cap's need to "drift" every night, Big City's need to play the lottery, and the paradox of vows that cannot be stated "outright"

need to admit where they are before they can get where they want to go. But, because such an admission would be too damaging, they avoid it and remain in their unsatisfying positions.

The same is not true for men who have satisfied greater portions of the same equation. In *Sword of Honour*, for example, we encounter characters who are almost pathologically focused on their goals because they feel they are trying to *complete*, rather than begin, their quest for masculine validity, and this difference between Waugh's characters and Selvon's is indicative of the qualitative difference between finishing a project and coming up with a plan. Guy Crouchback has money, property and a certain degree of power. In order to gain the prestige he is missing, he joins the army. His decision-making process is streamlined; he has a clear role model in Sir Roger and his most viable destination is obvious to him. In the Moses novels, Moses and his friends do not have this luxury. Lacking in almost every department of the masculine assertion, they scatter throughout the city scavenging for money, sex, power, prestige *and* property, because they feel deficient in every department. They go off in different directions (although the majority of them do return to sex) without any clear idea or a clear strategy about how to attain any lasting sense of satisfaction. Perpetually pulled between a vague and far-off ideal, and a concrete and recognizable reality, between an inviting fictional world and a difficult real one, they *appear* lazy and ineffectual even when they are pursuing, in a fashion, their loftiest ambitions.

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are all disguised and only partially articulated indications that the boys want change and affirmation; they just can't appear to be trying too hard.



This is not to suggest that Guy's approach to masculinity in *Men at Arms* is at all productive or that strict adherence to any model of masculine behaviour produces any positive results. Quite the opposite, Guy only begins to feel really happy when he escapes both the army and Sir Roger and begins to pursue a modest, self-directed existence. But, even when he is under the influence of problematic narratives, he is at least able to form a clear bridge between his dreams involving Sir Roger and his own life. There *is* an army for him to join. No parallel "masculine verification centre" seems to exist for Moses and the boys, and this absence goes a long way toward accounting for the odd concurrence of overreaching ambition and paralysing apathy in the Moses novels. It also helps to explain the conspicuous lack of real telos in stories which seem to be all about hopes and goals. Because the thing that they most want is so big, so complicated, and so far off, they can't hold the whole thing in their heads all at once. As a result, they experience a number of false starts as they pick up, then drop, plans to satisfy parts of an idea that pulls them in several different, often contradictory, directions. And, in the midst of these divergent pressures, a tendency toward passivity, even stasis, can be seen as a very reasonable desire not to have oneself pulled apart by a situation where any step in any direction brings with it some countervailing pressure, some equally insistent demand to move toward some different, loosely affiliated, destination. At the very least, it should be obvious we are not in Aphorpe country when Galahad arrives in London with absolutely no luggage at all and says that he can see "no sense to loading [himself] down with a set of things" (LL 17). And, when Moses announces that he is "a norphan" (MM 61) in *Moses Migrating*, it is

fairly obvious that he will never be troubled with the extinction of the "centuries old" family name.

Still, none of the above wishes to advocate any kind of Naipaul-esque assertion that West Indians are lacking in culture and history and are thus immune to the kinds of cultural and historical maladies that afflict Guy, just that Guy's models have been encoded in a more detailed and explicit way and that, as a result, his negotiations with his masculinity take place in a more clearly defined space. In narrative terms, Guy knows what type of character he wants to be, he just has trouble getting the army to make the story work. Moses and Galahad are equally willing to become characters, but they are not exactly sure who they want to be, or in which story they would like to belong. Where Guy's struggle is characterized by frustration, Moses and the boys are characterized by anxiety because they are still deliberating between a number of unsatisfactory narrative options. The result is a kind of existential angst without the benefit of essence; they agonize over what type of people they are going to be, but none of the options includes a privately directed, radically free, self. Jeremy Poynting says that "when one kind of disguise may be as good or bad as another, the very freedom to choose may trap the psyche in all kinds of strange prisons" (262-3), and it is in exactly such a prison that Selvon's characters find themselves. While Guy is weighed down by an overdetermined set of ideas about what his life should be, people such as the bagless Galahad seem to lack the weight that is necessary to resist the insistent machinations of the city around him. As a result, Galahad opts for several different disguises in Selvon's novels; he is, at different times, a mimic man with bowler and umbrella, a "savage" lover trading on his blackness

for sex, and a militant black activist fighting against racial stereotype. Each version represents a new effort at attaining some kind of respect and dignity through his inclusion as character in some temporarily attractive narrative. The failure or refusal to choose a single narrative line frees Selvon's characters from Guy's type of pathology, but replaces it with an equally regressive set of negotiations and problems. Their wide-ranging approach spares them from certain problems, but creates other ones. As a result, it is a kind of strength and kind of weakness. It is lucky and unlucky:<sup>12</sup> lucky insofar as the conditions are *always* right for them to re-make themselves, unlucky insofar as they are never exactly sure what they really want to be made into. However much they want to change, they don't know where to start.

### **Fictional Content: What The Stories Are Saying**

Still, despite the above dilemma about choices, most of Selvon's characters *would* gratefully accept any start which made them rich, and, this being the case, money (both in terms of its actual absence and its imaginary presence) makes for a useful point of departure for a discussion of the content (as opposed to the form) of the masculine narratives they encounter. Up to now, this chapter has focussed upon the lure of the fictive forces that Moses and the boys encounter, upon the factors that make them

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<sup>12</sup> This paradox mimics the kind of opposition that Gita Rajan and Radhika Mohanram find in the whole status of the immigrant when they borrow from Said to say "exile is privileged status if it is one's choice, but it is apocalyptic if it is enforced" (5). The problem is that Said's binary construction fails to recognize that there are degrees of enforcement, and parameters in which choices must be made. In the view of this study, these parameters are importantly influenced by the presence of various grand narratives.

vulnerable to narrative manipulation; the following pages deal with the specific features of this force. The preoccupation with money that pervades Selvon's work is indicative of the depth and the degree to which his characters feel the imperative toward capital as an imperative toward self. They want to be men with money because they want to be men, and they want to be men because they want *to be*, to really exist. And, to achieve this, they are forced into some unsatisfying negotiations with the world around them.

The first of these negotiations is of a common, but complicated nature. Like most of us, the boys in *The Lonely Londoners* are required to *do* things in order to procure money. They need to work for a living. And, although they are not unusual in finding this to be a distasteful state of affairs, their position relative to work is fairly singular. Almost everybody gripes about his/her work, and a lot of people genuinely hate their jobs, but the vast majority of these people find some compensation in other areas of their lives. They have families, friends and histories which exist outside the framework of the work world and inside the framework of some more productive daily life; each new framework possesses its own narrative potentialities. Each one posits its own unique set of relationships and unique opportunities for the creation and expression of self. The easy access to these compensating frameworks makes it possible for some people to view work as a sour *component* of a life without making the whole life unbearable. The fact that these counterbalancing forces do not exist for Selvon's immigrants (the fact that they are new to the city, and far from those who know and love them) allows work to take on a disproportionately important role in their lives even though they feel humiliated by the jobs they are required to do. Because none of them can claim any place in the city without

work, because "every man on his own" (LL 21) in London, work becomes *the* framework that governs their lives. It determines where a man lives, what he eats, where he goes, and, to an important degree, whom he knows.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the usual male imperative for work and/or career becomes aggravated in Selvon's immigrants because they are nothing, have nothing, without it.

And, while I do not mean any of the above in a specifically Marxist sense, the general conception of work as a vital expression of our humanity is an important one if we consider the jobs Moses and the boys get in terms of Marx's conception of work. That is, if we substitute, say, "toilet cleaner" for "work" we start to encounter men who believe themselves not to be people who clean toilets for a living, but rather people who are defined by the act of cleaning toilets. In *The Power of The Story*, Michael Hanne correctly notes that "people don't tell stories rather stories tell people" (Hanne 12), and because work forms the most powerful narrative framework in their lives, Selvon's characters come to live inside a story that forces them (tells them) to think in debilitating terms. Without the benefit of any more sustaining narratives, the depressing frame of the work world becomes extraordinarily important for the boys, and reaches a level that is remarkable even in the employment-obsessed world of masculine narrative.

Selvon directly recognizes this in the long passage about the welfare office in *The Lonely Londoners* when the narrator says

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<sup>13</sup> Selvon himself has noted that you "wouldn't expect to meet somebody like Moses or Galahad or one of my characters in the BBC" ("Christened With Snow" 96).

a job is all the security a man have... when a man out of work he like a fish out of water grasping for breath. It have some men, if they lose their job it like the world end, and when two-three weeks go by and they still aint working they get so desperate they would do anything. (LL 29)

And anything (including everything from male prostitution to pigeon-napping) is what they do. The familiar fish out of water construction is a good one here because it reveals not just that a man without a job is in danger of dying but that a job is *the* necessary condition for survival; it makes an inhabitable environment all by itself. Further, the welfare office is characterized as "a kind of place where hate and disgust and avarice and malice and sympathy and sorrow and pity all mix up... a place where everyone is your enemy and your friend" (LL 29). The mix-up arises, I think, because of the contradictory demands of their masculinity and their humanity. For many men, a job isn't just security against poverty, it's an avenue toward (psychological if not material) existence,<sup>14</sup> and, in situations in which one's existence is threatened, human generosity can be really hard to find. As a result, this particular type of misery does not love company; it hates company and it fears it. Like the British working class who fear the immigrants will "get job in front of them" (LL 22), the men in the welfare office are too vulnerable to feel generous. Their common hardships do not foster any serious sense of community, and instead they tend to view each other as

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<sup>14</sup> Warren Farrell has commented on the fact that "unemployed men commit suicide at twice the rate of employed men" (164), while employment makes no impact on the suicide rates of women. The clear correlation between unemployment and self-annihilation suggests that male existence can be tied to male employment in ways that go beyond self-perception and into life and death matters.

competitors in a contest which (as the fish out of water example suggests) is essentially a life and death struggle.<sup>15</sup>

Or, at least, this is how it looks from the outside. For, despite the hostility outlined above, there is a subtle sense of “fellow-feeling” in Selvon’s descriptions, even if his characters have a tough time detecting or expressing it. This is where the sympathy, the sorrow and the pity meet up with the disgust, the avarice, and the malice. It is also where humanity meets up with masculinity. Uniquely qualified to understand what it means to be unemployed, desperate and alone, every man at the welfare office can’t help empathizing with every one else’s suffering because everyone else’s suffering is so exactly like his own. At some unexpressed level, it seems that they have feelings of sympathy, but they rarely express them because feelings themselves compromise masculine legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> Because each man needs to take care of himself in the real world, and because he is discouraged from expressing emotions for their own sake, his sympathy never gets through to anyone else, and so, despite, the fellow-feeling, no productive sense of community develops. In *The Changing Definition of Masculinity*, Clyde Franklin accounts for such phenomena by asserting that “it is culturally more acceptable for men to respect each other than it is for men to like each other” (141); if this is so, then the stoic tension

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<sup>15</sup> Even the mercurial Galahad feels the pressure for employment when he tells Moses that “when you not working you does feel bad” (LL 107). For all their clowning and their apparent lack of interest, the boys are in fact a work-obsessed people. The general critical view that that they are lazy and shiftless suggests the degree to which Selvon’s critics have been fooled by the masks of his characters. As I have already suggested, the boys go to great lengths to *look* relaxed and carefree, but such appearances are hard-won given the variety of pressures (including the necessity of employment) that they feel beneath the surface.

of the welfare office is the result of two distinct impulses: a repressed, "culturally unintelligible" (Schoene-Harwood xii)<sup>16</sup> one to directly express sympathy or affection, and a muted, culturally sanctioned, one to simply acknowledge, respect, the other men they encounter. But, without any obvious indications of sympathy, silent expressions of respect are easily misinterpreted and apprehended in terms of the avarice, disgust, and malice the narrator notes. The result is that the welfare clients miss an opportunity for community because they misapprehend their situation; they participate in a reductive story which overlooks too much and retains too little. More problematically, such a story emphasizes aspects which are unproductive while obscuring aspects which are significant. Like most of the characters I have addressed, the welfare clients miss the parts that would help them most while clinging to some regressive and unproductive stories about what they are and/or should be.

Of course, work is not the only area that could use some more direct emotional content. Most of Selvon's characters have preoccupations with work and money that are matched by similarly overdeveloped preoccupations with the sheer mechanics of the sex act. Just as their obsession with getting "a work" obscures the possibility of communal feeling, their obsessions with getting "a woman" (or rather many women) seem to obscure the emotional component of sexual relations. Although the boys are constantly

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<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the narrator's later assertion that "it have a kind of communal feeling with the working class and the spades" (*LL* 59) is not anywhere in evidence in the Welfare office. Even though there might be a communal feeling, there is no communal expression.

<sup>17</sup> Schoene-Harwood also suggests that the suppression of interior processed like emotion simultaneously "debilitates individualism" (xii) because any difference from established ideals is interpreted negatively. This means that the masculine individual must "aim to stay uncontaminated by the alleged inferiority of



on the prowl for "talent," this search is never addressed in emotional terms. Instead, they stockpile details about "an ordinary girl tits jump[ing] up and down," and "the quivering and shivering [of] a black backside" (*MA* 15). They manage to isolate sex as a strictly athletic achievement and readily compare statistics with each other in a manner which suggests that they are deliberately short-circuiting the more powerful and (to allow D.H. Lawrence to creep in) cosmic dimensions of sex. Refusing the depths of sex, the Selvon character typically engages in a wide breadth of sexual activity that frequently seems to be more for the sake of the boys, than it is for himself or for his partner.

But, just as the surface stoicism of the welfare office reveals some severe and subverted emotional tension, the light-hearted attitude to sex cannot disguise the pathology which underlies it. For Moses and the boys, the lack of emotional investment in their various conquests does not suggest anything relaxed or casual about their approach to sex; it just indicates what parts of sex they are afraid of. They obsess about the parts they feel they can control, and they suppress the parts they cannot. Ramabai Espinet at least partially recognizes this when she says that sex is at once the stuff of "sports and pastimes" and "important enough to form the subject of every 'old talk', lime, or ballad" ("A Celebration" 58) in Selvon's fiction. Thus, while each girl might be unimportant by herself, girls in general become a thoroughgoing obsession, one that seems to offer some of the legitimacy they are lacking in almost every other area of their lives.

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(his own intrinsic alterity" (xii). Crudely, he must de-emphasize any aspect of himself which departs from the traditional vision.

This schizoid approach to sex, whereby it is both a joke and a means of self-validation, arises from the combination of at least two factors. First, because internal operations are undervalued in "real men," a private emotion like love cannot compete with the idea of sex as public performance. Unable to discuss what they feel for a woman, the boys instead offer details of what they have done to/with her. The result is that sex is at least as much about telling one's friends as it is about satisfying one's lust (to say nothing of anything as romantic as sexual communion). The divided approach also has roots that are outside the strictly sexual, but inside the strictly masculine insofar as sexual potency is used to compensate for material shortcomings. Stuck in dead-end, low-paying jobs, Moses and the boys are without most of the more obvious material signifiers of masculine legitimacy,<sup>18</sup> and the absence of these signifiers makes them overly interested in the sexual arena because it allows them to be real men without being rich men. Their desire to collect notches on their bedposts arises at least partially from the fact that they probably do not own their own beds. To be blunt, they use the women in the room to compensate for the room itself and, in so doing, they hope that one masculine assertion (that a real man is the master of many women) compensates for the absence of another (that a real man is a success in the world). Such compensation is, of course, extremely dubious because their real problem is neither the lack of sex, nor the lack of money; instead it is in their continued belief that they must live inside the framework of epic masculine narrative.

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<sup>18</sup> They do not have cars or houses or any of the other usual signals that one has "arrived" as a man, although their keen interest in clothes can be seen as an effort to present a reasonable facsimile of affluence in the public sphere. Insofar as this is the case, they are once again de-emphasizing private space while carefully constructing public personas.

in their belief that their lives are public rather than private entities, and in the kind of internal vacuum these approaches create.

Because they refuse to recognize or prioritize their individual internal directives, Selvon's characters have difficulty resolving the contradictory demands of the public script they are living. When Galahad first dates a white girl in London, the countervailing pressures of sex and money are resolved not in terms of what he feels, but in terms of what he thinks his public expects. His feelings of "shame to bring the girl in that old basement room" (LL 76) must be overcome because "the boys would never finish giving him tone for spending all that money and not eating" (LL 76). The point here is that Galahad as a person never enters into his own decision-making process; he just sacrifices one image for another. He admits his poverty not for the sake of his lust or his loneliness, but for the sake of his friends and their expectations. Left to his own devices, it seems, he would have preferred to skip the sex in order to deny the room, to skip something really gratifying for the sake of a powerful but unproductive image. For Galahad and others, image really is everything, and the images they adhere to are the result of much "austere training" (Gilmore 18) in the field narrative and in the field of masculinity. The imperatives toward material success and sexual conquest that the boys feel are derived from masculinity's function as an "overarching set of ... assumptions structured in narrative terms" (Hanne 12). The result of the assumptions that the grand narrative communicates is that each man's life becomes an "artificial product" (Gilmore 18) that follows the dictates of a very particular story.

And, one of the key problems with the story of masculinity (and one of the key features of all stories) has to do with matters of inclusion and exclusion. Because the coherence and effectiveness of a story depends on a rigorous process of selection, narration (or at least powerful narration) always leaves things out. As I have already noted, Michael Hanne believes that "one of the essential functions" of telling a story "is that it enables us to discard massive quantities of material we deem to be unimportant" (Hanne 8). Good stories, he says, know how to stick to "the few items which we regard as significant" (Hanne 8). They take an enormous amount of information and distill it into a recognizable and compelling pattern of valuable signals. All of the really poor storytellers we all know (and fear) have one thing in common: they don't know how to differentiate between significant and insignificant information. They don't know that their socks are boring and insist on telling us all about them, and, insofar as they do this, they are tedious people to be around and not a lot of fun at parties. But the problem isn't socks, and the solution isn't to take their socks away. There are "massive quantities" of things that do not belong in stories, but do belong in people's lives, and it is not productive to discard everything that doesn't make good narrative. Jean François Lyotard says that "narrative... is a mechanism... for forgetting" (xii) things that are unimportant, but Selvon's characters forget too completely, and they discard some things they would be well advised to keep.<sup>19</sup> Because the "fictions of manhood" (Rosen xvii) are such well-constructed stories, because

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<sup>19</sup> The most obvious example of this occurs when Moses abandons (forgets) his productive (and not exclusively sexual) relationship with Doris in *Moses Migrating*, but, several smaller instances reinforce the point. Galahad's quintessentially masculine desire to reject Moses' offer of help and prove "that he could take care of himself" (LL 22) places him in a dangerous situation where he almost gets lost, and

their narratives are full of powerful images, and so free of boring details, men are seduced<sup>20</sup> into *living* inside the story. Problems arise because, as a story, masculinity leaves a lot of things out. Further, because it's such a persuasive story, it doesn't *seem* to be leaving anything out at all because narrative "mystifies our understanding by giving a false sense of coherence and comprehensiveness to a selection of scattered events" (Hanne 11) and signals. Masculinity appears as a complete, and self-contained totality even though its persuasiveness depends upon the fact that it overlooks a great deal. Thus, while living inside a work of fiction promises an idealized life, it tends to produce a diminished one, one with lots of missing parts.

The result in the Moses trilogy is a collection of characters who are forever "watching up at the clock on the Odeon" even though they "have wristwatch" (LL 74). They are forever attracted to things like the Odeon (things that are brighter, larger, and more impressive than the little things they have themselves) because the bigger things seem to have greater narrative currency, to promise inclusion in a more satisfying story. The truth, however, is that their own watches can also tell time and, more importantly, that their watches belong to them. And, to be blunt, if they were to look at their own wrists instead of the tower, they would have a much better chance of seeing where they are going. Indeed, the necessity and difficulty of looking inward to self (however ill-defined that self might be) instead of outward or upward to the sky is at the very centre of

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Lewis' pathological desire to control his wife as property destroys their relationship. In every case, a too-ready adherence to a specific and narrow storyline obscures productive possibilities.

<sup>20</sup> I borrow the use of the word "seduce" from Ross Chambers and his book *Story and Situation*, where he contends that good stories have cunning and complicated ways of disarming and gaining power over their subjects.

Selvon's trilogy and represents the central struggle facing the majority of his characters. A series of stories seduces them into believing "in the great city of London, centre of the world" (LL 121), when what they get is "a lonely miserable city" (LL 114). This causes them pain, but they generally fail to realize that a great deal of its loneliness and misery arises from the disjunction between the stories they have heard and the city they encounter. As their ambivalence about returning home indicates, the lure, the "big romance" (LL 69), of London is too strong to be resisted, even if, in reality, it leaves them "bewildered [and] hopeless" (126). They want to live in the story of London for the same reason they want to live inside the story of masculinity; both sound really good and both promise undisputed, publicly affirmed, legitimacy. Neither one delivers, of course, and, instead, each man is confronted with his own insignificance in relation to the important things and the important people that surround him. Despite what people have read and heard, big cities do not make people feel big; they make people feel small. Being a man does not make men feel strong; it makes them feel weak.

### **Modes of Real Resistance: Escaping The Same Old Story**

Still, despite the crippling and pervasive nature of their relationships with big cities and big stories, the boys are not entirely and hopelessly at the mercy of grand narratives. They do construct some viable strategies of resistance and these strategies are enacted in some pretty productive spaces. Like most of us, they have their best ideas when they summon the courage to deal with their problems directly, and, despite their tendencies

toward self-delusion, they are sometimes surprisingly adept at diagnosing the nature of their own illnesses (even if they are less successful at finding fail-proof cures). Aware that their problems are with fracture and with heavy-handed stories, they pursue community and narrative construction as modes of rehabilitation. They combat the chaotic enormousness of the London street by meeting each other in a small, stable basement room, while Moses' literary ambitions are, in their most basic form, an effort to take the reins of his own narrative, to take control of his own story, and, in so doing, take control of his own life. These are both very good ideas, and although the first project is finally more successful than the second, both strategies illustrate that personal satisfaction is largely dependant upon the individual's ability to escape an alien or external set of narrative expectations and enact or encode a set of his own.

While the vast majority of *The Lonely Londoners* deals with unbelievable and disjointed experiences on the London streets, the novel closes with some prolonged attention to the much smaller, much more stable, space of Moses' basement room. The shift in focus from the macro to the micro also reveals a shift from public to private spaces and, if men are constructed through public visibility, the latter shift also reveals a movement away from the kind of performance that typifies the public life of many men, and into some more organic expressions of self, however tenuous that self might be. This movement results in the sudden and unexpected feelings of comfort and generosity that the characters experience just before the end of the novel. Selvon spends more than one hundred pages pursuing the theme that "general life [is] really hard for the boys in London" (LL 114), and, as I have suggested, this hardness is rooted in their inability to

contend with the pervasive, seductive and unproductive narratives they encounter. But, even if things are hard, it is clear that getting "together now and then to talk about things back home" (LL 114) mitigates suffering in an important way. Importantly, the statement about life being hard and the one about getting together appear in the same paragraph such that the second sentence follows immediately from the first. This construction suggests that "general" life is combatted with a kind of *specific* life such that the general world is the purveyor of suffering, while the specific world produces solace. By retreating into Moses' room, they escape a bewildering system of value and participate in one that arises directly from their individual and collective needs. The result is that Moses' room becomes an organic expression of the day hospital Fanon and Geronomi manufactured in Algeria. It becomes its own micro society "with its own multiplicity of relations" (Fanon and Geronomi 715), and these relations are not (as strongly) conditioned by the multiplicity of relations outside. Indeed, the efficacy of both the room and the hospital depends upon the ability to neutralize the "flow" of the external system of value in order to create a new and distinct space.

Thus, the narrator's suggestion that Moses' dirty room becomes like a "church" (LL 122) is not as far off as it might seem. The boys are coming for salvation and sanctuary in very important ways and, despite Moses' assertions (wishes?) otherwise, they are not just coming now and then, but "nearly every Sunday" (LL 122). They come to unburden themselves, to confess the week's trials. They come "together for a oldtalk" (LL 122) that might help them make sense of things that otherwise fail to do so. And, the specific correlation between their Sunday gatherings and the rights of confession (LL 122)



is appropriate not just because they get to unload their problems, but because of the very specific reversal the act of confession involves. The value of confession, from a theological perspective, is not so much about getting rid of one's sins, as it is about the transition from negative to positive experience. One does not drop his sins off at the church and leave them there; rather, his sins are washed away, or even *transformed* into an avenue for salvation.<sup>21</sup> More than anything else, the confessional is a place where shame can be redeemed, where failure is not just mitigated but put to a very specific and positive purpose, and this, I think, is the real value of the confessions in Moses' room. They take the many humiliations of their scattered existences, and transform them into something positive. Thus, they make a kind of redemption from the stuff of their own failures.

This said, one does not wish to be overly liturgical about what the boys are doing. Their "retreat... into the narrow confines of ... home" (McCulloch 127) is not overburdened by any unreasonable sense of formality. If these are spiritual exercises, they are exercises of a particularly organic sort, and the boys that show up on Sunday have the same concerns as the ones we see for the rest of the week; it's just that the change in circumstances produces changes in them. Like most of us, they behave differently at home. But, like most of us, the content of their behaviour at home is conditioned by their experiences in the outside world. They are still talking about sex and money and "fusic," but there is something fundamentally co-operative about their approach when they are all

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<sup>21</sup> What I am trying to highlight here is the degree to which a different narrative frame can affect the individual's view of specific realities. Because the confessional emphasizes a different set of assumptions than the outside world, it can take the "raw data" of sin and posit it inside a story of salvation rather than damnation.

together. Indeed, Moses' assertion that immigrants "have no sort of family life" (LL 114) in London is valid only in the traditional sense. While it is true that there is no such thing as a traditional nuclear family (and if precedent matters, that is probably a good thing), the real advantages of "family life" are located on an emotional and psychological, not a material or sociological, level.<sup>22</sup> Selvon's characters, elsewhere so interested in what they are told to be and what they are told to want, effect a minor kind of coup by skipping the overhead of family life and moving directly toward the emotional and psychological advantages. When they flop about "on the bed, on the floor, [and] on the chairs" (LL 122), when they say they have important engagements but "never get[] up to go" (LL 123), and when they angle toward free cigarettes and free coffee, they behave *like* members of a family because they have all of the benign carelessness that only real familiarity and real (though grudging?) affection can produce. As most of us recognize, being with family isn't always the most exciting way to spend one's time, but, when families work, they allow people (and fictional characters) to relax and stop performing. And, when the pressure to perform is lessened, people (and fictional characters) start to feel better. This is what happens in Moses' room, and, despite the fact that they are not blood relatives, the boys make up a pretty functional family. Nobody gets in serious fights. Nobody skips church. Nobody misses Christmas. Everybody chips in. Nobody judges anyone else too harshly. To use the stock family terminology, they are "there" for

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<sup>22</sup> Actual families and actual family responsibilities are something of a disaster in *The Lonely Londoners*. Tolroy and Lewis both have difficulty with the traditional role of patriarch inasmuch as any increase in familial responsibility corresponds with some sort of individual crisis. Both are, to different degrees, overwhelmed by the demands of their new situations, unable to measure up to the greater expectations that come with the status of husband or breadwinner.

each other, and "there" is an emotional space that can only be discovered when they escape the demands of their public lives.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the boys find their greatest comforts by emphasizing the emotional over the material, the private motivation over the public directive. And, even if this takes place at some subconscious level, their ability to recognize and pursue an agenda governed by "inner space" is remarkable given the number and variety of signals they must fight off before they can get to it. It is also a direct rejection of the idea that "manhood is an artificial product" (Gilmore 18) because their gatherings violate almost every tenet directing masculine behaviour. The long-winded, gossip-heavy confessions in Moses' room accomplish precisely nothing in the "real" world and, for anyone interested in "getting ahead" in the world, they also seem to waste a great deal of time. The condition of the physical space (its small proportions, its squalor etc.) seems to broadcast the host's material insignificance, and the malleability of the guests (they sit on the floor and expect very little in the way of refreshments... or heat) suggests that they are not used to anything any better. Everything about the place suggests failure and weakness and, in voluntarily claiming this space, in choosing to go there, they find a subtle, more discreet, form of success and strength, which is based on their individual needs and hopes rather than the expectations and demands of the larger world. By accepting failure in terms of some of the grander narratives, they begin to construct some more productive stories for

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<sup>23</sup> Obviously, I am not trying to suggest that physical proximity has nothing to do with emotional space. Quite the opposite, it is vitally important that the boys gather in a room together. What I am trying to emphasize is that the *features* of the physical space are less important than the features of their internal space(s). In terms of everything really important, it does not matter that Moses' room is dirty and cramped: it just matters that they are all in it together.

themselves and their friends. And, these stories, unlike the ones outside, help them to make sense of their lives and achieve a measure of personal satisfaction and self-identification.

Now, I do not believe that the above argument is really outrageous or even particularly contentious given the reams of available evidence in the three novels.<sup>24</sup> The lesson that Selvon's characters are repeatedly taught, and the one they repeatedly forget, is this one: any grand, public pursuit is dangerous and disappointing while any small, private pursuit has potential. Trying to make the world recognize you ends in farce; trying to get your friends to recognize you ends in a free smoke. And, while a free smoke isn't as good as worldwide renown, it *is* better than the humiliation and abuse they get the rest of the time. So, although this more modest approach is relatively untested (Selvon's attention to togetherness and cooperation is restricted to just a few pages at the end of *The Lonely Londoners*), the small sample contains more genuine expressions of relief than the remaining 440 pages of the three novels.

Indeed, many of the difficulties Moses encounters in *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating* arise directly from his failure to remember or retain what he seemed to know at the end of the first book. His material ascendance to the status of landlord is not accompanied by the "life of ease and plenty" (*MA* 100) he had hoped for, but by "troubles [that] have multiplied tenfold" (*MA* 100) since he left the basement room. His movement

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<sup>24</sup> Consider the variety of botched ambitions in the texts: Galahad's shame about his apartment and his simultaneous need to get some "white pussy" (*LL* 74), Big City's epic ambitions, which eventually lead to "a mad dash around the bend" (*MA* 10), Moses' desire to get his name "in the Sunday issue" (*MA* 69) for his carnival Costume. In each character's case, some need to elevate his status and increase his prestige, results in some type of tension, tension which, in most cases, is not successfully resolved.

into house seems to have moved him out of the home I describe above. "The parting of the ways" (*MA* 2) that he tries to enforce on Galahad and the rest of the boys results in little beyond his own isolation because he trades emotional comfort for material comfort. He trades the private self of the basement for the public self of the English landlord. Like Lewis, who becomes so obsessed with his rights as "husband" that he abuses his wife, Moses becomes so preoccupied with his "station" (*MA* 3) in society that he does real damage to his emotional relationships.<sup>25</sup> The ironic result is that, for Moses, securing his material privacy results in his becoming a more public figure. He gives up on the individually constructed life he was making, and becomes (or attempts to become) a character in a larger narrative to do with the correlation between the masculine and the material. And, as I've been attempting to show, that kind of story is almost always a sad one.

With all of this in mind, it is amazing that some of Selvon's critics find time to criticize the apathy of Selvon's characters. And, while I plan to save the vast majority of my critical griping for a later section, it seems important to highlight the problems with this particular charge through some direct comparison with what I have out-lined above. Typically, one finds critics bemoaning the *lack* of career-driven, materially-obsessed behaviour in Selvon's characters as if everybody automatically assumed that the absence of such behaviour is necessarily regressive and unproductive. They don't and it isn't. The

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<sup>25</sup> Now, I am not trying to suggest that immigrants are particularly ill-suited for the status of husband or the status of landlord. Obviously, they have as much claim to these titles (and their advantages) as everyone else. All I am trying to illustrate is that they (like a great number of people from all kinds of demographic groups) make a big mistake when they allow their relationship with their status to override their relationships with themselves and those close to them.

most misdirected of these critics is Harold Barratt, whose treatment of Selvon frequently sounds like a kind of masculine call to arms.<sup>26</sup> His detailed handling of the racial dimension of Selvon's work does not stop him from advocating several disturbing stereotypes about the "proper" roles of adult men. Barratt repeatedly derides any and all activities that fall outside his vision of what a good and decent man should be, a vision derived more or less directly from the fabled Protestant work ethic. Taking middleclass status to be the transparent goal of all reasonable people, Barratt thinks that Moses' admission that he has learned to "think poor" (*LL* 81) and Galahad's hope to "get by" if not "get ahead" (*LL* 72) somehow come to "perpetuate[] the immigrants' second class status" (255). In Barratt's view, Moses' problem is not that his dreams are too big; it's that he hasn't successfully adopted the publically-motivated, materially-obsessed austerity associated with "mature" masculinity. Barratt disparages the meetings between the boys (and any other non-competitive interaction) as examples of regressive behaviour that leave them "ill-prepared for independent, effective, assertive existence in ... metropolitan society" (258). Throughout his study of Selvon, Barratt assumes a direct correlation between material and marital status and the state of being "emotionally mature men" (250). He finds any dependence "on the emotional support of the boys" (257) particularly distasteful because he feels that dependence somehow compromises the assertiveness and effectiveness he so cherishes in "metropolitan society." In every case (and I'm just listing the problems here) the reader is struck by the twin assumptions that hard work, ambition

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<sup>26</sup> Preoccupations with political agency and action lead to similar, if much less pronounced, critiques by Wyke, and Looker.

and “getting ahead” must be hardwired into the existence of any remotely happy or successful man, and that any type of dependence (even dependence that leads directly to catharsis) is necessarily regressive and unproductive.

In short, Barratt’s solution houses most of the major problems I am trying to highlight in this dissertation. Using only his ideological certainty for proof, Barratt concludes that there is something unnatural or shameful about the lives of bachelors, low-income workers, and renters, and, using logic many people associate with their grandmothers, he feels that a nice girl and white-collar job would do everybody a world of good.<sup>27</sup> What he does not see is that his kind of thinking (which is characterized by a clear intolerance for variation and an unflinching belief in the merits of grandiose narratives) makes more problems than it solves. In Barratt’s view, Selvon’s characters suffer primarily from a chronic shortage of Christmas pageants, company picnics and Volvo station wagons and their “emotional stasis” is a direct result of this absence. His suggestion, that the “irresponsibility” of Selvon’s characters is morally wrong and psychologically damaging, only works if one accepts the merits of what Barratt calls responsible. And, as I have already tried to show on a few occasions, the efficacy of the traditional vision of male responsibility (the selfsame one that Barratt forwards) is very much in doubt. Selvon’s characters do not need wives, careers, cars, mortgages and kids.

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<sup>27</sup> In taking up such a position, Barratt is not alone. In “The Bachelor and other Disorderly Men During the American Founding,” Mark E. Kann addresses a longstanding tradition of viewing the bachelor “as a source of disarray in families, society and the nation” (2). During the American Founding, many “expected the criminal justice system to perform the negative educative function of disciplining the unrepentant bachelor” (2). Kann reads this as an effort to “ridicule, stigmatize, imprison, or banish men identified with subordinated masculinities” (2). The same might well be said for Barratt’s reading of Selvon.

they need to stop thinking that they can't live without them and Barratt needs to stop thinking it for them.

What is required is a shift in focus so that "independent and assertive existence" can be revealed for what it really is: a dressed up way of saying "cold and lonely life." The other option involves handing out copies of *The Complete Short Stories of John Cheever* to any one who will take them (or at least sending one to Barratt), because coldness and loneliness are everywhere in Cheever and almost always accompanied by a martini, a sedan and a house in the suburbs. Indeed, Cheever's entire body of work (which, of course, posits a new and alternative narrative framework for its readers) stands as a direct rebuttal to the project Barratt maps out for Moses and his friends. The point that Cheever makes again and again (and that Selvon suggests more than once) is that the project itself is a kind of hoax. Cheever's *American Dream* is essentially similar to Selvon's *Immigrant's Dream*, and chasing either one is, or should be, a non-starter. Satisfying those kinds of visions is finally unsatisfying because the dream is never one's own: it's just a story one has been told to read and remembered too well. And, whenever Selvon's characters manage to forget it or block it out, they start to make up their own stories and, not surprisingly, they start to feel better: some of Selvon's critics could do with a bit of serious forgetting as well (or at least some less dogmatic remembering).

All of this attention to the last pages of *The Lonely Londoners* has been aimed at a single purpose: to show how retreating from grand narratives leaves space for more productive, self-directed narratives. I hope to have illustrated the coercive power of grand narratives in the daily lives of Selvon's characters and the advantages they find in escaping



them. My approach to narrative in this section has been one which highlights the ways in which certain stories are integrated into the daily lives of individuals. Inside this approach, narrative is not so much encoded in words and pages as it is *enacted* in the lives of certain individuals, certain communities, and certain cultures. It is not so much about reading and writing as it is about receiving and sending signals that are actualized in real life, not imaginary spaces. In this type of narrative, the exact text generally remains hidden (there is no *Complete Book of Masculine Assumptions and Directives*) even though its existence and its content are made abundantly clear through the presence of “characters” who are clearly operating inside its narrative framework. In *The Lonely Londoners*, narrative is something that is revealed through the actions of characters such that shifts in behaviour reveal significant shifts in narrative allegiance.

This said, Selvon’s approach to story extends beyond the realms of applied narrative and into something like “narrative proper,” or “pure narrative.” In *The Lonely Londoners* the boys act out their rejection of the masculine storyline by sitting around in the basement; in *Moses Ascending* and *Moses Migrating*, Moses becomes less interested in action and more and more occupied with language and text. The first novel closes with Moses entertaining the thought that “he could... write a book” (LL 126), and the second two novels are essentially about his pursuit of what Bhabha has called “the emblem of the English book” (29), about his struggle to get his life into writing, into words. As I will attempt to show, this effort to enter the field of true narrative is a very specific effort to control, shape and direct the content of his own life, to control in language what he cannot control in real life.

In an essay about his early career called "Little Drops of Water," Selvon describes a situation where he felt he was "writing a book that was to be the plaster cast of [his] life" (58). His metaphor is a good one and reveals a good deal about Moses' project(s) in the last two books of the trilogy insofar as he makes it clear that writing is not just talking about life, but making it, or, more importantly, making it better. Just as the cast's function is to protect, straighten and strengthen something that is broken, the act of writing seeks to correct a serious sense of fracture and provides "a justification for living" ("The Leaf in the Wind" 56) for both Selvon and Moses.<sup>28</sup> Efforts to mend, strengthen and straighten are at the very centre of *Moses Ascending*, where both the house in Shepherd's Bush and Moses' memoirs are viewed as ways of escaping the "slings and arrows of misfortune" (*MA* 43), of ways of making a less random, less chaotic world.

Mark Looker correctly notes that "buying a house and writing memoirs dovetail as ways of controlling reality" (170), but narrative reaches at controlling an interior reality, while the house attempts to control exterior space. Each project runs into its own serious and specific difficulties, but the events of *Moses Ascending* make it abundantly clear that narrative is the more resilient of the two. Despite Mr. Barratt's hopes, home-owning is an unmitigated disaster in terms of making Moses' life better, and does nothing to help him escape the fray of the street, or gain privacy and independence. The house is almost immediately overrun by the chaotic forces of the street, but, long after the material walls

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<sup>28</sup> I realize that it is dangerous to draw close correlations between authors and their characters, but the fact that Moses and Selvon are credited as co-authors of the foreword to *Moses Migrating* must suggest that the two have some essential similarities relative to the value of narrative. At the very least, Selvon takes an uncommonly sympathetic attitude toward Moses' difficulties with his writing, and this alone

have given way, Moses struggles to make his life in words because he feels that “the will to narrative, the desire for story ... might make a teleological difference to [his] otherwise disjunctive experience” (Smith 2). Indeed, Moses’ central goal (and the only really teleological element in the three books) is to narrate, rather than read, his own experience, to write his way into existence by telling his own story. But, for most people, this type of reading is a really tough habit to break, and the most depressing and farcical aspects of Moses’ journey to story involve his doubts about the validity of his own voice, and his consistent tendency to construct the story of his life according to the narrative demands of stories he already knows (or stories Galahad and Brenda tell him to read).<sup>29</sup>

The opening sequence of *Moses Ascending* illustrates this dilemma and shows that Moses’ memoirs are grounded inside some of the more pervasive narratives that he is ostensibly trying to escape. When Galahad reads the newspaper classified ads, his effort to find a “desperate rich white woman [seeking a] black companion with view toward matrimony” (*MA* 1) leads directly to Moses’ finding and purchasing the house. The construction is such that the patent absurdity of the first project is paralleled by the absurdity of the second, and, in a number of serious ways, Moses’ behaviour reveals him as a “desperate black man seeking house with view toward independence and self-satisfaction.” The problem for Moses is that his effort toward independence is itself dependent on his acceptance of a (mostly) white, middle class vision of masculine

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suggests an element of real recognition between the fictional writer (Moses) and the writer of fiction (Selvon).

<sup>29</sup> Bluntly, his need to write a book that “everybody would buy” (*LL* 126) makes him susceptible to what everybody says. As a result, any type of criticism or anxiety, leads to a belief that “the whole structure of [his] work [must] be drastically altered” (*MA* 45).

legitimacy. He thinks the house will insulate him against the indeterminacies of London life, but the house is itself a manifestation of London's system and value (or rather its tendency to elevate the valueless), and his ownership of the building indicates that he is a part of, not *apart from*, the city around him because, like almost everyone else in the London Selvon posits, Moses is operating according to the dictates of a very public vision of success. Looking for inner peace in the form of physical structure should be a psychological non-starter, but it is also an idea that has been relentlessly sold to Moses throughout his life. His decision to purchase the house places Moses in a position where his penthouse becomes a kind of physical manifestation of the psychological disruptions and dislocations he experiences in his efforts to write his memoirs. He begins to construct the story of his life by buying into someone else's and, as a result, his life story (in the form of the pages he writes) is literally surrounded by the clutter and the chaos of his efforts to include himself in various other kinds of disjointed narrative.

But, despite his too heavy reliance on the signals London produces, Moses' original effort to write his life is informed by his desire to create himself as "a character in a nineteenth century novel... who forges his own identity apart from... social circumstances" (Looker 171). Isolated in his penthouse, with Bob acting as liaison with the outside world, Moses seeks to recollect years of intense emotion and upheaval in some hard-won moments of tranquility. And, inasmuch as this approach represents a straightforward search for some quiet space, it has some clear advantages and bears some important similarities to the retreat he and his friends managed in the basement. It offers (or at least seems to offer) the possibility of escaping the disjointed signals of the street,

and in their absence, the possibility of discovering an individually directed self. Like Crouchback's move back to the family estate, Moses' move to the penthouse seems to suggest that he might be able to maintain some small space which follows the dictates of his own particular longings.

This does not turn out to be the case because there are serious problems with what Moses does with the space he gets and with what he does with the limited amount of tranquility he musters. The key difference between Guy's retreat to his estate and Moses' retreat to the penthouse is that that Guy is going *home*; he's going to a private place that he knows, understands and appreciates and his desire to go there has little to do with his imagination and a lot to do with his experiences. The problem for Moses is that he wants to go to *Guy's* home, he wants the retreat of the English gentleman because he believes that it must be superior to any retreat, any home, he could make for himself. The space isn't really his because it belongs to a story that he did not write and that does not include him. As a result, he has great difficulty controlling it.<sup>30</sup> Moses does not get any privacy because he brings so many narrative ghosts and so much of the city's clutter with him.

The same sort of thing is also true of his desire to think of himself as a character in some nineteenth century novel. His stated desire to be the type of person (the type of character) who forges his own way in the world is eventually overshadowed by his desire to *imitate* the mannerisms and habits of the independent characters he admires. He likes

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<sup>30</sup> Again, I am not saying that Guy is in any way more deserving of "an estate" than Moses, just that Guy's experiences make the country estate a much more organic space for him than the penthouse is for Moses. The two retreats differ because of the different motivations of the two characters: Guy just wants to be left alone, while Moses (consciously or otherwise) wants to be seen and appreciated in his new situation.

the idea of the independent self just as he likes the idea of private space, but, whenever he needs to make a big decision, he tends to be more of a publicly focussed mimic than a self-directed man. His tendency to cite various narratives as justification for his own behaviour, and his clear affection for outmoded dialogue are indicators that he has doubts about the legitimacy of his own actions and his own voice.<sup>31</sup> When he situates his own life in the midst of "other scribes" (*MA* 63) and sees it through the stuff of "television [and] films" (*MA* 63), he is (like most writers) stuck between his desire to be creative and his inability to be original. (*Everybody* thinks his big problem has something to do with expressing himself on paper, but a lot of the time it has a lot more to do with the self doing the expressing.) Moses wants to express himself, but his self has been so thoroughly conditioned by his encounters with narrative, that he ends up sounding like characters we have already met. In the end, it is easier to get free of social circumstances than it is to get free of the nineteenth century novel; however much Brenda may be spying on him, for Moses, the nineteenth century novel is a kind of "Big Brother watching ... from inside [his] own head" (Horrocks 96). The walls that shut out the street can never shut out story, and as a result, *Moses Ascending* bears the stamp of the many and various narratives that inform and intimidate the story of Moses' life.

This is not, of course, to say that the walls are particularly successful at keeping out the street. In the rare moments when Moses does seem to be on the verge of escaping

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<sup>31</sup> George Lamming describes a similar situation when he says that the myths of England are "akin to the nutritive function of the milk all sorts of men receive at birth" (Lamming 13). His construction suggests that English stories are absorbed at some elemental, pre-conscious level and come to form the foundation of the immigrant's understanding of the world.

old narratives and on the verge of making his own,<sup>32</sup> he is invariably confronted by Galahad (or Brenda or some other representative of the street) who quickly informs him that his inward-looking memoirs are “shit” (*MA* 40). These critiques are particularly damaging to Moses because they complicate his effort to establish, then express, inner space. On one side, he has to deal with the internal clutter that results from misdirected narratives, while on the other side he has to deal with the thoroughgoing externalism of The Black Power party that has taken up residence in his basement. Championing themselves as heralds for a new era of increased racial awareness, Galahad and Brenda have very specific ideas about the kinds of stories “the people” need, and they are not particularly gentle with the ones they don’t like. Inasmuch as old narratives haunt Moses’ head, The Party haunts his house and demands that he write a kind of “committed” literature that can be measured in terms of their own preoccupations with political engagement and social conditions. I have already suggested that Moses thinks of writing as “a justification for living” ( “The Leaf in the Wind” 56), but he is not at all certain about the proper target of this justification. Because the competing demands of narrative legacy, social reality and personal indeterminacy are pulling in divergent directions, he frequently finds himself saying “the whole structure of my work [has] to be altered” (*MA* 45), even though the work he is talking about amounts to the content of his own life. Writing the story is also making his life, but he has serious questions about what he should make it

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<sup>32</sup> Such moments occur when Moses, as narrator, seems to “step back” from the high seriousness that marks a lot of his writing, when he begins to indulge in some highly idiosyncratic musing about the relative value of land-owning, the various merits of different women, the possible advantages of menial labour and other subjects which bear some very specific manifestations of his own individual psyche.

into, questions that arise directly from an even more serious question he poses at the beginning of the novel: "Why it is that a man can't make his own decisions and live in peace without all this interference?" (*MA* 14).

I hope that the preceding paragraphs serve as a kind of answer to that question. The absence of peace and the presence of interference arise out of the insistent and competing demands of various narrative voices inside Moses' head and inside his material reality. This conglomeration of voices makes it difficult for Moses to distinguish between his life as a character and his life as person. His austere training as narrative subject has fitted him for the role of a character, a *thing* that is directed by a power greater than itself (an author, a director etc.); it has not facilitated his growth as a person, an independent life that is (ideally) directed by some kind of self.<sup>33</sup> Moses' writing of his life is an obvious effort to assert his self-hood, but he is frequently reduced to the level of character. When he feels that his "gentle readers" (*MA* 90) might be disappointed that he "did not hop in the van and go along to record [the] further adventures" (*MA* 90) of Faizull and the illegal aliens, he fears that his life has not been sufficiently interesting for his readers. When he tries to make his "dialogue original, and not copy the cops and robbers" (*MA* 65), he is not talking about dialogue inside a bound and paginated narrative, but the narrative of his own existence. Like the soldiers who believed that war stories were the only narratives they had that were worth telling, Moses frequently fears that he is not measuring up as

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Whatever one thinks of the content of these sections, it is clear that they represent his nearest approach to original and individual narrative.

<sup>33</sup> I do not include the usual assumption that a character is imaginary and a person real for reasons that should be obvious at this point in the study. One of the crucial components of my argument is that people can, in fact, be principally imaginary entities.



character, that he is not a viable narrative subject; he then adjusts his real life to better fit some kind of story. The result, once again, is that the content of Moses' life is dictated by the expectations of narrative rather than the expectations of Moses. In terms of the distinctions I have outlined above, he voluntarily abdicates his personhood and becomes a character even when he himself is the author of the text.

At other times, however, the slippage between character and person seems to move in the opposite direction as fictional characters take on the weight and significance of real people. The most obvious example of this involves Moses' obsession with Farouk. Stung by Galahad's dismissal of his memoirs, Moses becomes convinced that writing about "the trials and tribulations" (*MA* 51) of minority groups will guarantee him a wide readership,<sup>34</sup> and begins to seek an audience with his two Pakistani tenants, Faizull and Farouk. He hopes that their story will "create a sensation" (*MA* 45) and provide "enough dramatic intrigue not only for a book, but for T.V. and the films" (*MA* 45). When the taciturn Faizull fails to provide any spark of intrigue, Moses becomes fixated on the idea that the ever-absent (and hence compellingly mysterious) Farouk will answer his prayers and fulfill his narrative's potential (not, of course, that the two are totally distinct from each other). The result of this fixation provides a fairly succinct example of what I have been trying to forward throughout this entire study: a man charges blindly after something that does not exist and almost gets himself killed in the process. Moses' first and major

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<sup>34</sup> Given the concerns outlined at the beginning of this chapter, it is difficult to ignore the basic plausibility of Moses' assumption. At least in contemporary critical circles, there *does* seem to be a greater interest in the racial and sociopolitical aspects of Moses' story than there is for his more private, idiosyncratic self.

problem is that he assumes Farouk exists, that it is possible to meet him. Moses believes that Farouk's life will have a positive impact on his own life, but serious difficulties arise from the fact that Farouk does not, in fact, have a life at all. He is just "a good idea [that] doesn't exist" (*MA* 87), a useful fiction constructed by Faizull and presented to Moses as reality. Unable to make this distinction, Moses' overzealous pursuit of the fictional Farouk results in a very real plan for Moses' extermination. In this case, the character of Farouk gains authority over life and death matters even though he is a completely fictional fabrication. Farouk nearly kills Moses even though he does not exist, and in so doing (or so *nearly* doing), he collapses the notion of a strict boundary between the real and the "made up," between people and characters. In Pavel's terms, he "rebounds" (84) out of his fictional world and into Moses' real one, more poignantly, he arrives with sinister intentions.

And, this collapse is not the exclusive result of the efforts of self-conscious fiction-mongers. In Selvon's trilogy, the most thorough-going realists are also prone to fits of narrative engineering that muddy the distinction between self-directed personality and externally manipulated character. The stinging critiques Moses suffers at the hands of Brenda and Galahad are based primarily in their belief that his "philosophizing [and] rhapsodizing" (*MA* 100) fail to contribute to the real world, that they do nothing to rectify the material situations of the London's black population. Their open distaste for the "little grace-notes" (*MA* 101) of pure aesthetics expresses some deep misgivings about the efficacy of artificially-constructed stories in shaping material reality. But, these misgivings are, in the end, disingenuous, and it becomes clear that the Party (and Galahad in

particular) is deeply interested in manipulating reality through narrative. And, despite their claims that they are the champions of individual agency (that they are fighting for the rights of black people to direct their own lives), they are very willing to reduce people to the status of character if it serves some greater narrative purpose.

The most obvious example of this tendency arises when Moses is wrongfully imprisoned after a Black Power rally degenerates into a violent debacle involving police. Rather than post Moses' bail, Galahad views Moses' unfortunate incarceration as "an opportunity" (*MA* 37) because he is thinking in terms of narrative, not in terms of his friend's individual discomfort. Like any reasonably good author, Galahad understands that things that are unpleasant for his characters need not be unpleasant for his readers, that well-rendered suffering *inside* the narrative framework can produce catharsis outside of it. Because Galahad knows this, he sees Moses' predicament as an opportunity to tell a compelling story in the papers, the radio and the television which continue to "rule [the] country" (*LL* 8). He casts Moses as his involuntary main character and plans a "mass demonstration" (*MA* 37) demanding Moses' freedom (which is of course the selfsame freedom he refused to grant in the first place so that he could have the demonstration). Here, Galahad acts as a kind of archetypal author; he creates a sympathetic character, then places the character in jeopardy in order to emotionally affect his audience. Depending on the author's intent, the character is either redeemed or condemned; s/he becomes comic or a tragic figure. The result of Galahad's machinations is that Moses' efforts to "get real" and rediscover the life of the street lead him straight back into a cage that is made up of little besides narrative. Galahad's story keeps Moses in a real jail, and,

given what we know about Selvon's world and Galahad's personality, it is not surprising that nobody (not even the materialists) suggests any material compensation for Moses' work as Galahad's character. Nobody pays him anything. Instead, he is promised payment in imaginative currency of the highest possible value: story. Revealing himself as something other than a true realist, Galahad offers epic narrative as compensation for real world suffering when he tells Moses that his "name will go down in the annals of black history for the sacrifice" (*MA* 37) he makes.

What is really surprising is that Moses doesn't leap at the chance. Otherwise so ready to be transmuted into character, Moses makes a personal stand against Galahad and misses the opportunity to become the sort of hero he seems to want to be.<sup>35</sup> His intransigence is short-lived, however, and he spends the remainder of *Moses Ascending* and all of *Moses Migrating* trying to create and/or manufacture opportunities that are essentially similar to the one Galahad makes for him. Generally unconcerned with whether he is a character or a person, Moses continues to hunt for stories that might "create a sensation" and give him the stature he so clearly craves.

While *Moses Ascending* is importantly occupied with Moses' effort to *construct* a specific narrative, *Moses Migrating* represents a more transparent and simplified effort at textual existence. In the latter novel, story is no longer a project so much as it is a real and definite prize. The Moses we find in *Moses Migrating* is much more interested in

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<sup>35</sup> This unusual stance may have a great deal to do with Moses' dissatisfaction with the author who is writing him or with the text in which he is to be included. Moses may refuse Galahad because of general distaste or because of a belief that he is of a higher station than his friend (He might be rejecting the power structure it implies.). He might also be unimpressed by the "black" part of black history. In any

publicity than he is narrative integrity and seems to have accepted Wyke's position that stories are not principally "a source of finding life's solutions, but ... a means of gaining ... publicity" (Wyke 58). His primary goal is to somehow "make the centre spread in the Sunday issue" (*MM* 69) and assuage his fears that he might not amount to much more than a "classified ad" (*MM* 72) or an unread obituary. Moses' behaviour makes it clear that it is the form, not the content of the centre story that is most important to him. His original opinion that the Carnival is a "pretentious masquerade" (*MM* 100) is eventually overcome when he figures out a way to be included and recognized inside it. And, whenever he is on the verge of giving up his project as too involved and difficult, Lennard offers some nugget about the editor's interest to spur him along. As ever, the crush of his real experience cannot overcome Moses' impulse to story, and he doggedly pursues the centre spread despite the various mutations that Lennard and other external circumstances perform on "his story."

As with *Moses Ascending*, the story plot in *Moses Migrating* is coupled with a related and complementary plot involving another of the protagonist's great desires. While the house complements the memoirs in the earlier novel, the love plot with Doris complements the newspaper story in the later book. In both cases, the desire for story refuses to observe the boundaries of the other plot and leaks into all aspects of the novel. In Moses' original exchange with Doris, he avoids any type of elaboration about his plans and ideas and instead informs her that she "will be able to read the details... when [his]

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case, this represents the only moment in the trilogy where anybody resists or refuses an opportunity for (even the most limited form of) publicity, legitimacy and heroic stature.

story appears in *The Guardian*" (*MM* 88). Here, he defers the direct exchange because he is more secure in the paper's legitimacy than he is in his own. This is yet another example of Moses' thoroughgoing belief in the value of text. His dream is to have the words on the paper (and *in* the paper) speak for him because he believes that both the form of the written word and the prestige of the public forum will insulate him against self-doubt and external criticism.

With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that his entire courtship (and courtship is almost certainly the right word for it) of Doris is informed by Moses' fascination with tales of courtly love. He views both his interactions with Doris and his belief in the greatness of Britain in terms of the "great stories in English Literature" (*MM* 137), and sees himself as a hero answering to "the call of duty and honour" (*MM* 138). This sounds suspiciously like the talk of a pre-war Crouchback, and proves that the stories that direct Moses' behaviour and opinions extend well beyond nineteenth century novels.<sup>36</sup> His stated desire that Doris will "take a leaf from one of those damsels' book" (*MM* 138) reflects his own desire to be a knight in shining armour, and this desire is itself importantly related to his belief that fairy tales are "the onlyest things... that have [the] definitive climax" (*MM* 167) for which he has been searching. More importantly, this climax promises the kind of "happily ever after" (*MM* 167) ending that has forever evaded him.

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<sup>36</sup> The decidedly militanistic tone of Moses' fight for Britain's legitimacy shows the degree to which Moses, like Guy, is trying to unleash "those facets of [his] masculinity that had merely been latent" (*Mosse* 110) in the past. The carnival becomes a kind of field of battle where Moses can prove himself in a more open and direct way.

Such an ending evades him because he seems incapable of creating a happy ending for himself. He *knows* that fairy tales operate under a very peculiar structure, and he seems to recognize that that structure is only dubiously applicable to his own life, yet he insists on forcing his own behaviour into its outmoded strictures and structures. Despite all his aspirations toward being a writer, Moses misses the first dictum of first-year creative writing, "write what you know," and falls for the old trap, "write what you've read." This approach leads only to failure, and his most successful moments arise when he begins to follow some more organic, less textually driven, directives. He sweeps Doris off of her feet during that too-brief period when he realizes that he is "getting no place with all this romantic shit" (*MM* 161) and opts instead for "the old one-two-three and use[s] some Trinidad tactics" (*MM* 161). The shift in behaviour is also marked by the "dichotomy of linguistic usage" (Wyke 35-6) as he drops the "despicable cur" (*MM* 156) tones of his acquired and ancient gentility and speaks in a more direct and forceful way. Like the brief retreat into the basement in *The Lonely Londoners*, this represents a clear effort to operate outside the field of conventional narrative expectation, and, like the earlier retreat, it has some very positive results.

The problem, of course, is that such moments are too brief, and what looks like an escape ends up as more of a day-pass, a brief interlude of narrative independence. In the end, he returns to the self-same set of principles that have been hurting him and he abandons the only strategy that has had any success at all. Under such conditions, it is appropriate that he botches his relationship with Doris, and that his carnival piece fails to deliver the message he had planned. He gains Doris by behaving like a person, then

immediately transforms himself back into a character and loses her. And, because he has forfeited so much of his individual agency in the effort to get back “in character” (because he has to dissolve himself as an actor), he is ultimately unable to communicate what he wants to communicate with his costume. He wins a prize, but it is a kind of dummy prize that has nothing to do with the “noble” intentions he originally imagined for himself. The silver cup he cherishes at the customs booth leaves him feeling he is “still playing charades” (*MM* 179) because it is the result not of a single disguise constructed by Tanty and Doris, but of Moses’ more pervasive inability to be himself, to stop pretending.

As I have been trying to show, resisting grand narrative is both a necessary and a nearly impossible task for Selvon’s characters. In order to cope with the psychic overload of the city and its chaotic signals, they pursue two distinct and countervailing strategies. One involves a movement inward that “shields the inner self from the environment,” while the other attempts to “project[] the inner self onto the environment” (Looker 68).<sup>37</sup> In the Moses novels, retreat is finally more successful than projection because of the largely undiscovered (or at least unrecognized) state of “inner self” in Moses and the boys. Too uncertain to really contest the environment directly, the boys need to establish and clarify their inner selves before they bring them into public, because (as I’ve been trying to show) the absence of the private contributes to the significance of the public sphere. Although aspirations toward textual existence are both desirable and productive, direct engagement with “narrative proper” can only be successful if the self is strong enough to contend with

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<sup>37</sup> Looker credits this idea to Georg Simmel’s chapter, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*.



the pre-existent strength and power of established narratives. Moses is finally unable to do this, and his effort to stamp himself onto the environment, to show “the white people that we, too, could write book,” (*MA* 101) is itself stamped out by the books and stories he carries in his head and encounters in the street. To really write the kinds of stories he wants to write, he needs to stop apologizing and stop looking over his shoulder. He needs to escape the grand narratives and realize that his own stories are grand in a new and different fashion. In short, he needs to be more like Selvon.

### **The Act of Reading: The Art of Writing**

This said, the unique nature of Selvon’s fictional world has itself been overshadowed by grand narrative insofar as critics tend to address it only in terms of “overarching... political assumptions” (Hanne 12). For a writer like Selvon, postcolonial discourse is something of a double bind. It is clear that he has benefited from the presence of some organized strategies to highlight the presence and value of “new voices” in English (or english) literature, but it is also clear that these same strategies tend to overlook a lot of the really good parts of his work. An unfortunate side-effect of the postcolonial project has been that really good writers like Selvon are never appreciated for their artistry so much as they are championed for their contributions to some important sociopolitical and racial causes. In the race for literary supremacy, we applaud postcolonial writers just for participating; we almost never bet on them to win. The result is that postcolonialism shortcircuits one of the most important assumptions of its own

project: that postcolonial writers belong with the very best writers in the world and the very best writers in history.<sup>38</sup> For postcolonial writing to reach this status we have to start talking about postcolonial writers the way we talk about other great writers, and this can never happen if we insist on treating all postcolonial writers as if they automatically have exactly the same (or very very similar) concerns and preoccupations. The primary achievement of great writers is in the *originality* of their approach and the *specific* power of their visions and the criticism about great writers reflects this. We do not talk about John Donne the same way we talk about Tennyson, and we do not talk about Hardy the way we talk about Woolf. The very nature of the individual genius (if that term is still permissible) dictates, or should dictate, the nature of the critical approach. Postcolonial discourse generally refuses to do this, and instead it enforces a troublesome uniformity on too many of its subjects, while still, and probably paradoxically, insisting on the greatness of each individual work.

In *The Lonely Londoners*, the narrator complains about the English people and their love for “films and stories ... about black people living primitive in the jungles” (LL 92). Such people do not want Moses and the boys to be “polite and civilise” (LL 92); quite the opposite, “the cruder you are the more they like you” (LL 92). Although Moses and his friends aspire toward sophistication and grace, they are appreciated only insofar as they conform to the racially-predicated expectations of their audience. This is to be expected in the prejudiced and ignorant London that Selvon creates, but it is truly

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<sup>38</sup> Obviously, “best” is a charged idea, but one which seems to me to be unavoidable. Even the most ardent post-structuralist believes Barthes (or Derrida) is better and more important than, say, Bloom.

disappointing that the same kind of logic seems to direct a lot of Selvon's critics who are similarly inclined to overlook sophistication and to seek certain "stories about black people" in its place. The small body of criticism on Selvon is marked both by a reticence to leave the well-defined territory of postcolonial discourse, and by a bullying effort to force the unruly aspects of Selvon's work back inside this same territory.

Even in the limited field of Selvon criticism, there is too much evidence of this tendency to provide any kind of itemized list. Instead, I provide just a few key examples in which the critic's postcolonial agenda results in some gross mishandling of Selvon's texts. After a perceptive and insightful analysis of the subtlety of Selvon's tone, Clement H. Wyke shifts to an investigation of what he describes as Selvon's "blunt outrage over reader ignorance" (Wyke 33) and uses the following passage as his only evidence:

"Moses come from Trinidad, which is a thousand miles from Jamaica, but the English people believe everybody who come from the West Indies come from Jamaica" (LL 12). Now, perhaps I have led a rougher life than Mr. Wyke, but I expect a bit more bile from my blunt outrage. The above evidence might represent a commentary about ignorance, but there is very little outrage in it. The narrator seems to take such confusion as a simple matter of course. ( Indeed, the error is of exactly the same quality as Moses' later confusion between Sikhs and Muslims in *Moses Ascending*.) Any outrage in the passage comes from Wyke, not Selvon, because it is Wyke, not Selvon, who is pursuing the postcolonial agenda. It is clear that Wyke wants to link Selvon with the kind of concerns Flemming Brahms outlines in his essay "Entering Our Own Ignorance: Subject-Object

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even the most anti-hierarchical political activist believes s/he can envision a better way of doing things.

Relations in Commonwealth Literature," but that link runs from Wyke to Brahm's Selvon isn't included. The agenda becomes more and more prevalent as Wyke proceeds, and, as postcolonialism moves to the forefront, Selvon's texts recede to the point at which they are often almost impossible to detect. His analysis of the end of *Moses Ascending* deliberately ignores the real sequence of events that gets Bob into the penthouse, and fabricates a new one out of his critical preoccupation with postcolonial thinking. Wyke says that "although illiteracy and social elevation do not usually go together" (Wyke 103), they work in tandem for Bob "because of the ethnic reality of skin colour which gains advantage in a racially prejudiced society" (Wyke 103). Here, he constructs exactly the type of racial allegory that Moses and Selvon try to derail when Moses expresses his fear that "black power militants might chose to misconstrue [his] Memoirs for their own purposes" (*MA* 139). He also overlooks the irrelevance of both literacy and race in the very intimate and personal chain of events that gain Bob the penthouse. Wyke suggests that the situation is one where the ignorant white man overrides the literate black man and takes his place at the top, but even the most casual observer knows that sexual infidelity and mutual dependence are the key factors in Bob's ascendance. What happens is this: Moses gets caught with Bob's naked wife. Bob says, "This is the end" (*MA* 133). Moses needs Bob to run the affairs of the house. In order to keep Bob around, Moses offers the penthouse as incentive to stay. Wyke overlooks all of this because he is looking for racial statement, while Selvon is "just portraying the relationship ... between two human beings" ("A Conversation" 97).<sup>39</sup> And, while Selvon displays a delicate comic touch in the above

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<sup>39</sup> This quotation of Selvon's actually applies to a different fictional situation in *A Brighter Sun*, but is

situation (he creates a clever ironic reversal through the highly charged interplay between sexual and other needs), Wyke's approach not only misses most of the subtleties, it also steamrolls them into the kind of moralistic allegory that we have all seen a thousand times before<sup>40</sup> and that Selvon specifically tries to avoid.

Wyke is not the only one with such tendencies. Harold Barratt's effort to situate Selvon's characters inside the feminist discourse (and then judge them inside it) suffers from a similar inability to differentiate between what the text says and what he wants it to say. Barratt's version of Moses' descent into the basement involves Jeannie's "seduction *by* Moses [which] destroys the warm friendship" (Barratt 252 emphasis mine) he has had with her husband. The use of the preposition "by" suggests that Moses has somehow broken down Jeannie's resolve and led her astray, when it is clear that the naked Jeannie makes a naked request for Moses to wash her back. What Selvon describes sounds more like Jeannie's seduction *of* Moses rather than the other way around. But, because Barratt believes that "Selvon's immigrants ... practise a decidedly sexist philosophy [where] the female is at the service of the male" (Barratt 250), he is unwilling to accept any sequence where the female manipulates the male, especially when the consequence of such manipulation is the ascendance of the female and the humiliation of the male. This makes

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specifically designed to defuse the idea that all interracial exchanges must automatically contain an element of "racial statement" ("A Conversation" 97).

<sup>40</sup> The degree to which Wyke is attempting to "toe the party line" of postcolonial discourse is evidenced in what he avoids as much as what he fabricates. While he expounds on the imaginary racial dimension of Bob's ascendance, he carefully avoids noting that Moses' presence in the basement is the specific result of Brenda's blackmail because he is unwilling to deal with the teleological complexities Brenda's treachery suggests. Because Black Power is seen as a transparent good inside postcolonial discourse, Wyke avoids Selvon's clear criticism of the movement and its agents and instead views Bob's whiteness as the source of all of Moses' difficulties.

for a serious problem, but the problem is not feminism, it's Barratt's clumsy handling of it, and his unwillingness to engage the aspects of Selvon's texts that go beyond the boundaries of conventional feminist thought. Good writers tend to expand our vision of the world, their whole function is to *complicate* our understanding of the human condition. Selvon is just such a writer, and the world he presents is too complicated for the kind of programmatic thought Wyke and Barratt want to practice. Blackmailing black activists and sexually manipulative women might not be very desirable as political exemplars, but complicated, multi-faceted, multi-directioned characters are at the very centre of all good fiction. As critics, we need to *discover* fictional worlds, not police them with pre-existent formulas. When we ignore the unsettling contradictions Selvon presents, we do not create more productive political worlds, we just wreck some really compelling fictional ones.<sup>41</sup>

What is really depressing about all of this is that is so completely unnecessary. These critical practises are actually guarding themselves against (if not beating up on) the very complexities that make Selvon's work as good as it is. Selvon has said that the writers of developing nations have

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<sup>41</sup> This is true even in the case of a sensitive critic like Mark Looker. Looker's strange suggestion that Galahad "appropriates the city by competing with the monuments that surround him" (67) ignores the fact that Galahad isn't competing at all; he's paying homage to a greatness that dwarfs him. He feels good because he can say he is a (small and insignificant) part of London's majesty (LL 68-69). Similarly, Looker's suggestion that Moses buys the home "to invent a more inclusive community" (170) seems to be little more than wish-fulfillment fantasy because Moses buys the house with the explicit intention of leaving his friends behind and pursuing some kind of isolation (LL 3). In both cases, Looker's interpretations fit nicely into conventional postcolonial readings, but they don't work at all for Selvon's specific texts.

to start thinking in terms of world literature, of contributing universally rather than contributing merely with protestation novels, with days of slavery, with the hardships of the black man, and so on. We have had a great deal of that. We want to rise above that. (Nazareth Interview 87)

His own work stands as a very solid example of this kind of project. Again and again, Selvon tries to present characters who are forced to contend with, but are not defined by, their racial and sociopolitical status. And this should be very good news for people interested in the narrative representations of oppressed peoples because it subverts the colonial idea that "racial identity overrides every other aspect of existence" (Loomba 144). By insisting on the multifaceted nature of his characters, and by showing the complex intersections between public and private lives, Selvon does not defy the postcolonial project; instead he shows the depth and breadth of the experiences of marginalized people, and he shows it in a way that is compelling on emotional and psychological, not just political and sociological, levels.

I have tried in this chapter to illustrate a number of distinct, but interrelated aspects of Sam Selvon's Moses trilogy. It is important just to reinforce the by now obvious truths that Selvon's characters are locked in an intense struggle with narrative, and that failure in this struggle results in the abdication of self and in the installation of some fictional voice as the primary directive force in his characters' lives. The most important of these narratives involves the various manifestations of the masculine storyline, which seduces men into accepting several heroically regressive visions of self at the expense of some less glamorous, more productive, ones. The degree to which the Selvon character escapes

these visions is also the degree to which he can be said to claim (or reclaim) what Betcher and Pollack call his “personal meaning” (139). The avenues toward such meaning involve either a flight from, or a contention with, existing narrative constructions. Flight offers a kind of temporary sanctuary and stability, while contention suggests the possibility of some more permanent changes in the system of relations that govern exterior and interior realities. The former proves successful, while the latter (and much more difficult) project remains a plausible but as yet unrealized ambition. Finally, I have attempted to show the ways in which Selvon’s critics have been seduced by a different kind of grand narrative, and to show that, like Selvon’s characters, their devotion to a particular kind of story leaves them unable or unwilling to perceive and pursue some possibilities that seem (to me at least) to have real potential. In short, I have spent a great deal of time marking the slippage between real and fictional worlds because this slippage seems to be particularly pronounced in Selvon’s work. In fact, it has reached the point at which his real-life critics suffer from the selfsame maladies that trouble the characters he made up.



## **Chapter Three**

**Paule Marshall: Men of Property, Self-Erasure, and the Feminist Uses  
of Masculine Narrative**

This chapter addresses two of Paule Marshall's most important works, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and *Praisesong for the Widow*. In so doing, it resituates a number of the problems I have been addressing so far. Because the author is both an American and a woman of colour, Marshall's novels offer several new opportunities for this investigation of masculine stories even as they present new and really difficult problems. The shift from the Old World to the New World brings with it several important shifts in narrative framework, insofar as the grand narrative of Europe (as specifically encoded in London) remains distinct from the grand narrative of the New World, or, more directly, the grand narrative of America. The stories which dominate Marshall's America are distinct from the stories which dominate its European antecedent, and this leads to new and different negotiations with the idea of masculinity. Characters like Deighton Boyce, Silla Boyce, and Jerome Johnson must contend with America's idea of "the Real Man" whenever they attempt to establish and maintain some vision of self.

But, while the problems associated with American masculinity are undoubtedly delicate ones, they are dwarfed by the logistical problems this study faces as a result of Marshall's gender and her feminism. If it is difficult to talk about the distinctions between American narrative values and English narrative values, the current cultural and academic climate makes it even more difficult for white men to talk about what they think women, particularly non-white women, are saying. In such a climate, a white man's desire to talk about a black woman's treatment of masculinity can be seen as highly suspect and even dangerous. It gets even more dangerous when someone suggests (as I do in this chapter) that certain visions of female strength are derived directly from

masculine storylines. My suggestion is that Silla Boyce becomes a feminist icon only insofar as she acts in an archetypally masculine way, and that the duplication of this archetype is unproductive for both men and women. I think the tragedy that is *Brown Girl, Brownstones* suitably illustrates this.

Still, it seems unwise to barge into such sensitive areas without establishing some clear operational framework. Some clarification is certainly required, and I wish to state as directly as I can that I have no desire to challenge Marshall's status as a feminist writer, and no desire to undermine the feminist project. My intention is much more cooperative, and seeks just to explore the points of intersection between discourses which have a lot in common. This exploration means that it is not always possible to "observe the silence" that some forms of feminism demand of men, and the refusal to observe silence makes speaking out of turn almost unavoidable. For speaking, I make no particular apology; for offending people, I offer some, although I continue to hope that studies like this one might establish the *collective* value of masculine and feminine discourses, and that, perhaps, no one will be offended in the first place.

### **The Politics of Speaking: Men, Women, and Masculinity**

As the titles of many of her major works (*Brown Girl, Brownstones, Praisesong for the Widow, Daughters*) might suggest, Marshall's career has been preoccupied with the concerns and difficulties that women, particularly women of colour, face in Western Society. Her books have been published by *The Feminist Press*, lauded in feminist and postcolonial journals, and she has rightly been considered among the more important

voices in the fiction of African-American women.<sup>1</sup> By her own admission, her work is “interested in discovering and unearthing what was [and is] positive and inspiring about [the] experience” (“Interview” 5) of marginalized people, and in pursuing “the unique opportunity to create, to reinvent” (“Interview” 5) cultural and individual understandings of those people. In the terms that I have been using, this is an effort to select new evidence in order to create new and more productive stories, stories to combat the dominant and regressive ones that are already in place. That such a project should focus primarily on narratives that govern and direct women’s behaviour is hardly surprising.

What might be surprising is her project’s inclusion next to Selvon’s, and Waugh’s, and its presence in a study of masculinity. Both Selvon and Waugh have been accused of sexism, even misogyny, and, as such, both have had very little presence inside feminist discourse. Marshall’s appearance here, like Selvon’s appearance next to Waugh in the previous chapter, is intended to be jarring because the immediate apprehension of distance should contribute to the later revelation of nearness. The fact that Marshall does not *appear* to belong in this study helps to contextualize the argument that she does.

This said, the structure of this study is not derived only from a desire to shock the reader. There are more valuable reasons, the most significant of which is the following: a framework must first be established before one can deal with its mutations. I have been

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<sup>1</sup> While Marshall has never achieved the kind of critical and popular success that Toni Morrison or Alice Walker have, she has been a major presence in the world of American women’s writing for several decades, and was among the first black American women to achieve any kind of recognition from the literary world. And, while Marshall’s complicated and convincing treatments of political, social and interpersonal relationships have not, perhaps, been seen as “socially relevant” in the manner of Morrison and Walker, she has received several literary awards and honours, including the American Book Award, the Langston Hughes Medallion Award and the John Dos Passos Award. In 1990, she was honoured by the PEN/Faulkner Award.

trying to show how stories about masculinity work, and men, as the primary targets of these stories, seem like the most likely subjects for such an investigation. Waugh and Selvon were obviously very different writers and very different men and their characters reflect these differences, but, as I have been trying to illustrate, they have importantly similar preoccupations with regard to the demands masculinity places on men. And, while the specific content of the masculine assertion possesses a certain degree of malleability, the enormous magnitude of its narrative force is pretty constant. Different men might *conceive* of the masculine ideal in slightly different ways, but it seems that almost every man, or at least almost every character I have dealt with so far, feels the weight of the ideal in his day to day life.

But, even if we accept the practicality of starting with men, and the assumption that different men in different places feel the weight of masculinity differently, Marshall remains a woman writing (primarily) about women, and as such, has no obvious connection to any of the above. Her status as a woman writing about women seems to disqualify her from inclusion in a study which might easily be considered phallogocentric and thus antagonistic to feminist concerns.

Of course, masculinist discourse is not hostile to feminist discourse; it's actually derived from it. Like many people who write about culturally constructed ideas of gender, I have been attempting to look primarily at a single group of people in order to investigate how visions about the nature of gender-roles come to bear on real and fictional circumstances. In my case, the group under study has been men and the cultural construct has been masculinity. In taking this approach, I have not been altogether

different from many feminist writers and many writers involved with Queer Theory and Transgendered studies. We are all, I hope, interested in coming to a more reasonable, less programmatic, understanding of the relationship between gender identity and certain behaviours, attitudes and approaches to human existence. We are all, in different ways, interested in exposing the degree to which our "natural" assumptions about people tend to arise from our too-ready acceptance of certain kinds of myths, stories, and stereotypes. In this elemental and most significant way, we are all, I think, involved in similar and complementary projects.

Still, none of this erases the fact that the study of masculinity is importantly different from other related projects insofar as other discourses deal with historically unrecognized groups while my project, by focusing on men, investigates the most comprehensively recognized demographic group in history. Unlike several discourses about feminine, homosexual and other behaviours, the emerging discourse about masculinity has not usually been required to prove that masculinity exists or that it matters; almost everybody knows it exists because almost everybody has seen it in action for most of his or her life. This difference is significant and one that separates masculinity from other more tenuously placed fields of study, or, more to the point, more tenuously placed people. As indicated in the introduction, the study of privileged and recognized groups must differ from the study of marginalized and unrecognized groups because the risks and dangers of the latter group will almost certainly be greater than those of the former.

Pierre Trudeau once compared Canada to a mouse and The United States to an elephant in an attempt to illustrate the uneasy sleeping situations that have developed on the North American continent. In his construction, he realized that a well-intentioned elephant does not make for a well-rested mouse because the slightest oversight by the elephant can result in serious problems for the mouse. Trudeau recognized that when the power differential is large enough, relaxation becomes almost impossible and, as a result of this understandable anxiety, a kind of pre-emptive hostility can develop in the more vulnerable party.<sup>2</sup>

I think something very similar happens when traditionally marginalized groups see something as enormous as masculinity lumbering into the field of gender studies. They have very good reasons to be anxious and these good reasons lead to arguments claiming that the whole idea of men studying masculinity is either ridiculous or redundant. In her book *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam argues that, while the union of the female and the masculine represents a new and important field of study, studies that emphasize the male and the masculine (studies like this one) are pointless efforts to "amass information about a subject whom we know intimately and ad nauseum" (3). And, while I have no doubt that Halberstam is right to think female masculinity is a valuable area of study, she is dead wrong when she says that the relationship between men and masculinity is one that we know intimately. As I have been trying to show, it's a relationship we know very very little about. Like many people

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<sup>2</sup> The recent success of the "I am Canadian" beer advertisements hinges upon an anti-American sentiment that persists despite the fact that Americans seem to really like Canadians insofar as they think of Canadians at all. What upsets Canadians isn't American hostility, but American enormity and American imperviousness. We're not afraid of what they are going to do so much as we're afraid of what they *can* do.

involved with gender studies, Halberstam confuses recognition with understanding. There is no doubt that male masculinity is highly recognizable in our culture and that it is infinitely more recognized than female masculinity, or even female femininity, but this does not automatically entail that it is highly understood; it just means that we've seen it before and that isn't saying all that much because there are lots of things that we recognize which we do not understand. I know my car when I see it, but I have almost no idea how it works. I might be able to see the elephant from a block away, but I don't know what he had for dinner any more than I know what the mouse had for lunch. The point is that intimate understanding requires direct, detailed, internal investigation, and no amount of external exposure can erase this reality. In all probability I will die before I ever understand my car because I am never going to have an intimate understanding unless I really start to look at what's under the hood. And, my lack of awareness won't be because I haven't seen enough cars; it will be because I haven't taken the time to look at them in a more important and meaningful way.

The idea that we know men and masculinity intimately and *ad nauseum* hinges upon the faulty assumption that "history is men's studies [while] women's studies is just an attempt to give women what men already have" (Farrell 14). Warren Farrell's breakdown of this argument bears quotation at length. He reminds us that

Women's studies questions the female role [but] nothing questions the male role. History books *sell* to boys the *traditional* male role of hero and performer. Each history book is 500 pages of advertisements for the performer role. Each lesson tells him, "if you perform, you will get love,



respect, if you fail you will be a nothing.” To a boy, history is pressure to perform, not relief from pressure. Feminism is the relief from the pressure to be confined to only the traditional female role. To a boy... history is not the equivalent of women’s studies; it is the *opposite* of women’s studies.  
(Farrell 14-15)

Farrell’s argument, which works with numerous other texts as well as it works with history books, illustrates that popular images, like those found in history books, do not lead to an intimate understanding of men’s lives; instead, they lead to widespread misunderstanding because the ubiquity of the images persuades people (even highly sensitive and educated people) into thinking they understand the way masculinity works, when what they know is how masculinity is sold and marketed. And, in a society as materially-driven as our own, we should be aware that the thing inside the package does not always match the thing we saw advertised on T.V. Usually, the things we buy are a lot smaller and more breakable than the sales-hook would have us believe.

And, while the attempt to investigate masculinity on its own terms has been a fruitful one, there are limitations to such an isolationist approach. Whatever masculinity is on its own, it almost always operates in conjunction with several other assumptions, and so it seems useful to perform a kind of “field study” that investigates masculinity in relation to other cultural fictions, most notably those having to do with femininity. As I have already suggested, such a study will probably run into some well-guarded fields because the relationship between the discourses is unfortunately hostile and suspicious in nature. But, although the origins of this hostility are hard to ignore and although it is

important to be sensitive to it, it remains unproductive to observe the boundaries this hostility dictates because the discourse on masculinity is neither a joke nor a serious threat to feminism.

Like many men, I have at times been convinced that silence and self-flagellation are the most appropriate forms of male participation in female discourses, but, like a lot of men, I also realize the limitations of silence as a mode of expressing concern. Men who write and think about gender are, it seems, in constant negotiation between the relative values of speaking and/or shutting up. If Halberstam is upset by the existence of a "growing and popular body of work on masculinity that evinces absolutely no interest in masculinity without men" (13), she must ask herself how happy she would be if men started talking authoritatively about women.<sup>3</sup> If male students of masculinity do not talk about female masculinity, it probably has a lot to do with the messages that certain types of feminism send to them. Women have frequently and perhaps rightly demanded that "Men don't speak for women" in matters of real concern, but this idea has leaked into more dubious territories where men are discouraged from speaking *about* women or even associating with them.<sup>4</sup> The result is that sensitive (or even just politically astute) men are hesitant to talk about women at all, and, among those who feel confident enough to speak, almost no one feels qualified to draw real conclusions or to defend them. Thus,

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<sup>3</sup> I also think that the ready correlation between masculinity and men is hardly unreasonable, and that, while Halberstam is right to highlight the variations that exist inside masculine behaviour, the association between men and masculinity is no more troublesome than the universally acknowledged link between women and femininity.

<sup>4</sup> I am talking of the fairly common feminist practice of having meetings, conferences, marches, and courses that restrict men from participating on the grounds that the male presence undermines certain aspects of the feminist agenda. The problem with separation along like the lines of gender, is that misses a lot of useful opportunities for exchange. Marshall, for example, has a lot of important things to say about masculinity; the fact that she is a woman does not undermine any of it.

Halberstam's difficulty with the state of masculine research might not be primarily the result of men's indifference to female masculinity, so much as their willingness to observe the spaces women have demanded they observe. Under the current conditions, only women can fill the space Halberstam recognizes, and, while she is right to say the space needs to be filled, she is wrong to blame its existence on cliquish male critics.

### **Men, Women, Self, and Story: Interconnections Between Masculine and Feminine Narratives**

This is all a very roundabout way of establishing the context for this chapter's investigation of Paule Marshall, both in terms of the writer's handling of masculine narratives, and in terms of the critical handling of her works of fiction. This chapter investigates how Marshall, a writer usually considered exclusively in terms of feminist thought, handles the idea of masculinity, and attempts to illustrate some significant, and frequently disturbing connections, between certain types of feminist discourse and certain destructive aspects of the traditional and contemporary male role.<sup>5</sup> In one of the only full-length studies of Marshall, Dorothy Hamer Denniston praises her for constructing "unquestionably strong, capable, independent, assertive" (Denniston 16) women, but

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<sup>5</sup> Marshall's critical oeuvre consists of at least two full-length studies, *The Fiction of Paule Marshall: Reconstructions of History, Culture, and Gender*, by Dorothy Hamer Denniston *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction*, by Joyce Pettis. There is also a fairly substantial collection of essays and reviews in journals like *Ariel*, *World Literature Written in English* and *SAGE*, and in larger studies like *The African American Novel Since 1960*, *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*, or *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction*. As the above might suggest, the critical preoccupation has been with matters to do with race, gender and geography. There has been almost no effort to consider the works of fiction as distinct story worlds, just a repeated effort to delineate useful, real-world allegories from the texts. And, while such a strategy might be appropriate when approaching a more programmatic (and famous) writer like Walker, Marshall's work is not self-consciously *instructional* in the same way. As a result, critical efforts to find straightforward instructions are often strained and unconvincing.

Denniston's vision of the strong woman is, in many ways, an embodiment of some highly conventionalized masculine behaviours. The result is a dubious kind of feminist victory whereby women are considered strong, powerful and good only insofar as they conform to the dictates of a masculine narrative framework. In the worst cases, female characters are seen as heroic when they duplicate the macho, aggressive, publicly-oriented behaviours emphasized by traditional masculine models. Marshall's complicated view of masculine and feminine power has, I think, provoked numerous examples of this "worst case" type of critical analysis.

Marshall has said that the ability to "see yourself in ... literature in [a] complex and meaningful way ... gives you... a sense of your right to be in the world" ("Meditations" 291).<sup>9</sup> She also admits to a preoccupation with the difficulties people face whenever they try to come "out from under the seduction of another's values" ("Interview" 4). Together, the two statements suggest that stories play an essential role in establishing and/or obscuring the individual's apprehension of himself or herself. Inasmuch as identification with literary fictions can establish the individual's sense of significance, the "seduction" of cultural fictions can be impossible to escape. The ability to find value in stories that protect a "particular spirited self" ("Meditations" 285) is juxtaposed against the steam-rolling homogeneity of more pervasive fictions and values, and what is at stake is nothing less than individual survival. Those who see themselves in individualized stories, those who see or find themselves in "small rites" (*PSW* 137) and

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<sup>9</sup> This view of the relationship between narrative and real existence echoes a statement of Selvon's in his interview with Kenneth Ramchand: "what I find in my writing is my identity and personality" (103).

"private rituals" (*PSW* 136) have a chance of survival. Those who abandon private directives for grand narratives are doomed to literal and spiritual death.

Together, this amounts to the by now familiar struggle to establish and maintain inner space. And, in these two novels, the struggle is a collective, gender-inclusive one.<sup>7</sup> If Marshall's protagonists are women, they are invariably women with intense and complicated relationships with men, and these men are themselves complicated, multi-layered characters. More importantly, the relationship between men and women seems to have the greatest potential for establishing some privately significant rituals. Marshall's documented interest in (primarily heterosexual) sex as a "free zone" ("Meditations" 283) of interpersonal connection suggests that sex is not simply recreation; it can be the basis of the individually directed self. Like Crouchback's family seat, or Moses' basement room, the sex act provides (or at least can provide) Marshall's characters with an opportunity to be free from the frustrations and the pressures of their public lives. This freedom allows them the fairly singular chance to pursue some personal and private aspects of themselves insofar as the successful sexual encounter emphasizes the importance of giving and receiving pleasure and love, two things that are in short supply in their insistent and demanding day-to-day lives.

Because sex is, or can be, so significant, many of the major tragedies in Marshall's fiction can be directly traced through the sexual relationships of major characters. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Deighton's hands no longer "arouse ... the full

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<sup>7</sup> Because of Marshall's interest in creating "complex and interesting" ("Meditations" 290) male characters, her work provides several opportunities to view intersections between cultural fictions of gender in a unique and meaningful way.

and awesome passion they once had" (*BGBS* 23) and this reality comes to signify the collapse of his relationship with Silla. The separation that begins with "her eyes hardening and her face shutting like a door slammed on him" (*BGBS* 23) reaches its fullest expression later in the novel when she says "Love! Give me a dollar in my hand any day" (*BGBS* 104). The progression is one in which Silla eventually decides to reject, or at least abdicate the "free zone" and to wholly accept the materialism of (Marshall's vision of) American values, values which leave her bitter, frustrated and alone. Similarly, in *Praisesong for the Widow*, Jay Johnson's evolution (or regression) from a "lover who knew how to talk to a woman in bed" (*PSW* 95) to a man who leaves his wife "lying there... abandoned far short of the crested wave" (*PSW* 129) represents one of the key factors in his metamorphosis from the sensual and exciting Jay, to the buttoned-down conventionality of Jerome Johnson. The breakdown in the sex relationship signals the death of Jay and the appearance of Jerome Johnson, a man his wife hardly recognizes and whose presence undermines her ability to recognize herself.

As both of the above examples suggest, Marshall's fiction is constructed such that the narrative of American Materialism represents the greatest threat to the private ritual of the sex act. She is intensely interested in "the acquisitive nature of [American] society [and] its devastating impact on human relationships" ("Shaping" 108). The idea of America, the mystique of material prosperity as a transparent and achievable good, is pervasive in Marshall's work, and "the American Dream" comes to form the basis of many of the more destructive grand narratives in the two novels. More directly, the city of New York, with the statue of liberty in the harbour and its rich history of immigrant

successes, becomes an emblem for the American immigrant's dream, a dream derived from, but not coterminous with the larger, less-defined, narrative. As such, some investigation into the nature of both the city and the dream is almost certainly necessary.

### **Materialism as Narrative Construct: The Simplification of the American (Success) Story**

It seems safe to suggest that New York occupies a place in the "new world" that roughly corresponds to London's place in the old world. In both cases, that place is the very front and the very centre. Both cities act as touchstones for their respective continents, and, in some important if undefined way, both act as a kind of yard stick for those who are under its influence. The "magic name" (*PSW* 168) of New York has its effect on almost everyone in Marshall's work, and acts as a measuring stick for people's dreams in way that closely mimics London's role in Selvon's fiction. The ambiguities of threats/promises like "if I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere" are almost exactly the same ambiguities Moses and the boys find in London, a city which is simultaneously a cold and lonely city and the centre of the world. Both cities assault and amaze their new arrivals with "a whirling spectrum of neon signs, movie marquees, bright-lit store windows and sweeping yellow streamers of light" (*BGBS* 37), and both finally act as profound physical manifestations of the enormous, contradictory and uncontrollable forces that trouble Waugh's, Selvon's, and Marshall's characters.

But if the cities are similarly huge and disorienting, and similarly important and influential, there are some really important differences in terms of the nature of the

influence and with regard to the things which qualify as really important in each space. London and New York might operate as touchstones for their respective continents, but the continents themselves are radically different and concerned with importantly different things. Even if we accept that London is the embodiment of what Lamming calls “the *idea* of England” (13), and New York embodies the idea of America, we must still investigate what those ideas are.

Crudely, the idea of the old world emphasizes history and cultural continuity, while the idea, the mythos, of the new world revolves around the opportunity for growth and advancement. These are not incidental differences; they are fundamental departures which establish the distinct narrative structures that govern each space. More poignantly, these different ideas give rise to a kind of antagonism which is hardwired into the grand narratives which govern both the old and the new world. In his introduction to *The Idea of America*, E.M. Adams considers America as “a pilot project to test ... the Enlightenment” (7) and finds two primary impulses in Enlightenment thought. First, Enlightenment ideals “envisioned the liberation of individuals from authoritarian institutions and cultural traditions that controlled their thought and action” (Adams 3). Second, they emphasized the value of “conquering and mastering the world” (Adams 7), usually through the exercise of reason. The applicability of the first impulse on the development of the American narrative is, I think, transparent. America “offered mankind a new beginning” (Adams 4), a chance to escape regressive structures that limited individual potential. As a result, the American narrative is not passive or indifferent to the historicism and cultural classism of the old world; it is violently



opposed to it. One of the new world's most important promises is the opportunity to *escape* history and cultural continuity. To new world settlers, cultural stability was an agent of oppression, something that guaranteed their marginality, while the promise of the new world was, in essence, the promise of a *tabula rasa*. As a result, the idea of America has consistently considered generating opportunity to be among its most prized and significant achievements.

The primacy of opportunity and advancement in the grand narrative of the continent has, in turn, led to a much more malleable and simplified social order, one that is untroubled by several of the questions that continue to dog the continent on the other side of the Atlantic. John Adams' vision of a people "without one noble or one king among them" (4) is a vision of a horizontally, not a vertically, structured society with freedom as its first, and most significant principle. If Europe is the land of the Hanovers and the Hapsburgs, of Oxford and the Sorbonne, America is the land where it doesn't matter where you went to school, or who your parents were. Conceptually at least, it is a nation devoted to the liberated, free-thinking individual.

But, as E.M. Adams notes, the original *idea* of America was a philosophically considered concept, not a pragmatic or opportunistic strategy. Under Enlightenment principles, freedom is an *a priori* good, not a practical advantage. The liberation of the individuals is not desirable because people want it, but because the liberation of individuals makes rational sense. It follows logically (but secondarily) that liberated individuals *will* pursue what they want, but only as an outcropping of the first principle. From the perspective of the Enlightenment thinkers, *getting* what one wants is not a

necessity. This philosophical base has, of course, been undermined over the passage of time such that "the central presuppositions of America have been discredited in the minds of many people" (Adams 7) and philosophy itself is viewed as a distasteful, pointless and elitist exercise. Under such circumstances, "all authority collapses into a mere power structure to be resisted and dealt with as best one can with the power one has" (Adams 8). The result is that a sweeping philosophical experiment is reduced into a straightforward brand of power-politics without any philosophical base whatsoever. In Adams' view, the two principles of the American experiment have, in many important ways, become antagonistic to each other. Drawing from Enlightenment thinking, Adams suggests that the original idea of America was organized around two central ideas: "1) the centrality of autonomous moral agents and a society that will support the development of the human potential; and (2) the power to get what we want, to impose our will on our environment" (Adams 8). But, in the current climate, "the vigorous pursuit of the second objective [has] perverted and distorted the kind of knowledge and the dimension of culture that make possible success with the first enterprise" (Adams 8). The rational and collective project of constructing a free society has, to a large degree, collapsed into several selfish and individualized efforts to get ahead, to get what one wants. Conquering the world is, in Marshall's America, about exercising power, not reason, and success is characteristically measured in terms of material, not intellectual or spiritual, progress. The idea of America has, according to Adams, been reduced to the point where the compelling image of a free society operates mostly as a kind of dumb-show, masking the straightforward Darwinism of kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, buy or be bought.

Obviously, Adams' pessimism is not shared by all cultural analysts, and, particularly in the current militarized climate, it is easy to find considerably more up-beat assessments of both America and American values. I do not mean to suggest otherwise, and I do not mean to specifically validate Adams' perception of real American society; I just wish to note its appropriateness relative to Marshall's work. Even if Adams is off-target with regard to the way America really is, he correctly accounts for the America Marshall posits. More specifically, Adams' assessment does a great deal to establish the nature and the parameters of a certain kind of American narrative. If Adams' study illustrates anything, it is that the American story isn't as complicated as it used to be. Relative to other stories, America's is a pretty simple storyline because it seems to have discarded so many of its sub-plots. Under the current narrative structure, prosperity is its own transparent reward, and, more importantly, prosperity makes no appeals to any other structures to help prop it up. The same is simply not true for Old World narrative in which several more subtle and complicated factors inform the grand narrative. While Crouchback agonizes about his family name and his reputation as a gentleman, Silla measures her life by storefront windows and "the beautiful things they does have in this man country" (*BGBS* 103). While Selvon's mimic man Harris concerns himself with reading the right newspaper, and carrying the proper umbrella, Jerome Johnson thinks in terms of "insurance policies" (*PSFW* 89) and new subdivisions. And, while all of this might come uncomfortably close to validating clichés about ugly Americans and bankrupt European dukes, those caricatures, like most caricatures, are formed by exaggerating some recognizable features, not by making those features up. Nancy

Foner's book, *New Immigrants in New York* reinforces the singularity of the American mythos when she considers "the lure of the United States" (198) in terms that are completely devoid of cultural reference. People come because of "the availability of jobs; the higher wages; and the promise of amenities, including, most importantly, higher levels of living and more consumer goods" (Foner 198); they don't come for the museums and the architecture.

There is, of course, something very valuable and even noble in the pursuit of "higher levels of living," but, as a narrative framework, the grand narrative of material opportunity has only limited value. The desire to escape the complex, multi-layered restrictions of old-world classism has understandably fuelled the desire for a classless society, but this effort to escape old and restrictive stories tends to tumble into territories where people begin to think in terms of a "melting pot" or a "culturally homogenized society" (Scarpa 94), a society where it's not just cultural restrictions that have been erased. Culture itself has been homogenized out of existence, and material opportunity fills the vacuum it leaves behind. The complex web of Old World restrictions is replaced by the trunk-road of materialism. In Marshall's fiction, the result is a new, particularly American narrative which views material opportunity as its only immutable tenet, and which views all other narratives as a threat to individual agency and freedom.<sup>8</sup> In such a relentlessly singular story, any effort to resist American materialism is recorded as a kind

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<sup>8</sup> The assumption of a hard-wired relationship between individual freedom and material prosperity is evidenced by the Cold War application of the word "communist" to people who refused to conform to the grand narrative of American prosperity. The appellation of the term "Red" to artists, homosexuals, and later "hippies" did not usually have anything to do with the subject's ideological orientation, but his or her distance from "normal" behaviour. Any departure from straightforward materialism was, and in some ways still is, viewed as a threat to the stability of the nation.

of moral or spiritual failure, while any emphasis on other values (any effort to refuse the melting pot) belongs only to inefficient, backward-gazing incompetents.

In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, most of Deighton Boyce's major difficulties arise from his orientation relative to certain dominant narratives. The central struggle in the novel is between Silla's pathological pursuit of the American Dream, and Deighton's refusal to spend his entire life "scuffling" for a "few raw mout pennies" (BGBS 11). Silla readily accepts the principles of a story based on hard-work, sacrifice, and material advancement, while Deighton, with his silk shirts and his trumpet, retains (at least until the dissolution of his personality) a belief in the warmth and the romance of life. His description of Barbados as "poor poor but sweet enough" (BGBS 11) demonstrates his willingness to use "sweetness" to mitigate material discomfort. And, despite his wife's (and by extension America's) insistence throughout the novel, he never trades his old stories in for new ones. When his new reality becomes threatening and hostile, Deighton does not yield to its demands. Instead he imagines himself into various fairytales and keeps his imaginary life distinct from his life in New York to the point at which his outward face forms "a closed blind over the man beneath" (BGBS 8). This strict delineation between the demands of New York and the demands of his own imagination leave Deighton with what Joyce Pettis describes as a "fractured psyche" (11), a psychological condition which "disorients perceptions of the world and complicates the manner of survival" (Pettis 12). Deighton's disorientation arises from his inability to live inside two narratives at one and the same time. He cannot accept New York's story without rejecting his vision of himself, and he cannot pursue this vision without refusing

his actual situation. Thus, the struggle between Deighton and Silla is also a type of struggle with the American Dream, or, more directly, an investigation of the relative merits and strengths of different narratives. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, the tragedy of Deighton's struggle for spiritual survival is matched only by Silla's quest for material advancement, and the singularity of each character's approach suggests the implausibility of compromise. Deighton's many and various retreats are hopeless attempts to escape the static contradictions of his life. If he accepts his position as an insignificant immigrant father in New York, his dreams must, almost by necessity, die. If he refuses it, he loses his ability to satisfy the demands of his material existence. Without the option of satisfying his dreams and his reality at the same time, he is finally forced to decide between his material and spiritual existence. He must choose where he is going to live, and, in so doing, he decides which parts of himself are going to survive.<sup>9</sup>

### **Fictions of Fatherhood: How to Show Up Without Disappearing**

Deighton's individual struggle for spiritual survival is, of course, informed by his role as father in the collective unit which is his family. The demands of his "dependents" hinder Deighton's ability to exist in dreams, even as the status of father (or more precisely the idea of the patriarch) acts as an important component in some of those dreams. Up to now, this study has focused upon single (or divorced) men and their

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<sup>9</sup> If the above is at all overstated, it is only overstated insofar as it assumes an element of choice which does not clearly exist. In many ways, Deighton's spiritual dissolution is forced upon him by his wife, and by the "machine-force" of industry.

efforts to find some type of masculine validation as a means of stabilizing and strengthening a vision of self. In Marshall's work, however, the close link between fatherhood and masculinity places emphasis on new and different aspects of the masculine assertion. Faced with the fear that their lives are meaningless, Guy, Moses, and others try to position themselves inside the grand narrative of masculine behaviour and to derive their own significance through their inclusion in an epic story. In both trilogies, isolation and invisibility motivate the protagonist's pursuit of masculine hallmarks like honour, glory, power and fame; in both trilogies, this pursuit ends badly.

A lot of the same fears trouble Marshall's male characters in *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones* and *Praisesong for the Widow*. As young men, both Deighton Boyce and Jay Johnson are forced to confront the tenuous nature of their own lives, and both feel pressure to justify and measure themselves against stories and expectations about the behaviour of real men. But, as married men and fathers, Deighton and Jay are forced to negotiate with some very different aspects of the masculine assertion. Isolation has almost nothing to do with the malaise Deighton and Jay feel because their most pressing concerns are shaped by the demands of their roles in a collective unit, the family. And, if the idea of disappearing is the cause of real fear for Selvon's lonely Londoners, it often acts as a survival strategy for Marshall's embattled fathers. The desire to become invisible, to escape the pressures and demands of family life, is at the very centre of both Deighton's, and Jay's life. Deighton's need to find "the warm oblivion" (*BGBS* 40) of his lover's arms finally manifests itself in his complete abdication of his personality in the Father Peace movement, while the private Jay, "a man eager to be gone" (*PSW* 136),

eventually disappears to be replaced by the business-minded Jerome Johnson. In both cases, the pressure to live inside the role of husband/father undermines each man's effort to maintain the most individually important aspects of himself.

In her study of paternity and fatherhood, Lieve Spaas notes "the profound difference between the biological reality of paternity and the cultural construct of father, the procreating *genitor* and the authority-wielding *pater*" (1). Like the distinction between men and masculinity, the one between paternity and fatherhood seems to be one where, as Larry May notes in *Masculinity and Morality*, "nature makes women mothers, ... it [just] gives men the chance to become fathers" (May 27).<sup>10</sup> In this construction, fatherhood is something which is achieved, not granted. Quite often, this "chance" is transmuted into a series of demands for those who choose to take it. Like our ideas about masculine behaviour, our ideas about fatherhood are not strictly defined, although almost everybody agrees that making money, winning bread, is extremely important. In his book *Fatherhood: A Sociological Perspective*, Leonard Benson says that "the breadwinner task is unquestionably the father's key responsibility [and that] it lies at the core of our ideology of fatherhood, fuzzy as that may be" (271). Viewed as the "cornerstone" (Benson 271) of the father's self-esteem and the basis of his authority inside the family, the father's role as breadwinner establishes the economic and interpersonal stability of the family unit. Consequently, the link between economic success and masculine achievement is aggravated in fathers and husbands because their

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<sup>10</sup> The quotation from May derives from his investigation into the legal aspects of paternity in *Masculinity and Morality*, and arises from his interpretation of a particular court case. The degree to which he actually accepts the supposition about women and motherhood is unclear to me, although he clearly believes that paternity is not the basis of fatherhood.



successes, and, more importantly, their failures are not just their own. Instead, they form the base of a many-layered social unit for which they are primarily responsible and from which they derive their significance as men.

Because of this system of relations, the home does not offer any real relief from masculine visions of duty; instead, it is the point that marks the intersection of several different visions of duty, the headquarters from which he begins, and for which he engages in, his negotiations with the outside world. These preoccupations with the external world have traditionally encouraged a kind of detachment from the internal workings of the home and given rise to the archetypal idea of the emotionally distant, all-powerful, father figure, a man with an emotional range that does not extend beyond the expression of disapproval.<sup>11</sup> As Benson notes, “we do not expect [the father] to say or even know much about” (4) his children, even if we expect him to devote his life to providing for them. In the generic construction, the “wife is the person to consult” (Benson 4) regarding the hopes, dreams and preferences of children. And, fathers who venture into these areas are not just unusual, but fundamentally unmasculine because direct emotional inquiries carry with them the stigma of softness.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the narrative of paternal power doesn’t just ignore the value of intimacy, it actually proscribes it. “The very things that endear the father to his children tend to undermine his authority” (Benson

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<sup>11</sup> In his influential research, David Gilmore suggests that fatherhood demands a movement away from direct expressions of love. “To support his family, the man has to be distant, away hunting or fighting wars; to be tender, he must be tough enough to fend off enemies. To be generous, he must be selfish enough to amass goods...to be gentle, he must first be strong, even ruthless in confronting enemies: to love he must be aggressive” (230).

<sup>12</sup> Obviously, this has been changing over the past few decades and Benson’s vision of the family unit is no longer an accurate reflection of (some kinds of) contemporary attitudes, but its applicability to the types of masculinity Marshall posits in her work is, I think, difficult to contest.

95), and, because the father's authority is seen as the basis of the family unit, any diminishment in this area is also a threat to the stability of the family itself; to avoid this threat, the father re-routes his energy to focus upon career and material advancement as a way of maintaining his authority and thereby maintaining the family.

The above is of course a crude drawing of a deeply complicated system of relations, but as a précis of the traditional role of the father, it helps to establish the kind of story and the kind of models that both Deighton Boyce and Jay Johnson face. Each character reacts differently, but the framework in which they operate is fairly constant. More importantly, the differences in their reactions reinforce the double bind between spiritual death and material ascendance. The variation between Jay's reaction and Deighton's reaction does not suggest possibilities beyond the imagination of each man; it emphasizes that whether they accept or reject the storyline they live inside, things are going to end badly. The key question in *Praisesong For the Widow*, "Couldn't they have done differently?" (*PSW* 139), is answered by the differences between Jay and Deighton, but the results aren't really very promising. Each man *could* have done differently insofar as he could have acted like the other, but, given each man's tragedy, each man's original doubts seem to have been very well-founded.

Deighton Boyce's open sensuality and romanticism are immediate signals that he has refused the role of the stoic, breadwinning father. A man who admits that he likes "the feel of silk next to his skin" (*BGBS* 22), and who looks "very young and irresponsible" (*BGBS* 22) despite advancing age and accumulating pressures, Deighton insists that "a man got a right to take his ease in this life and not always be scuffling"

(*BGBS* 85). He tells Selina about his hopes for the future and feels a real and obvious sense of loss over the collapse of his emotional and sexual relationship with his wife.<sup>13</sup> In short, he shows very little of the adult male's fear of self-disclosure that *The McGill Report on Male Intimacy* found to be pervasive in our society.<sup>14</sup> At the very least, he feels comfortable revealing certain aspects of himself and insisting on the importance of intangibles (like imagination and ease) and subtle tangibles (like the feel of silk) in his version of "the good life."

Predictably, Deighton's interest in how he feels leads to difficulties in a lot of what he does. Because he is interested in the processes of his life, he has trouble generating the same interest in something as quintessentially American as "results." In turn, this leads to several conflicts with his wife who is among the women whose "only thought [is] for the few 'raw mout pennies' at the end of the day" (*BGBS* 11). Silla's interest in the "end of the day" is never matched by her husband, who is much more interested in the day itself. The result is that Deighton is "only leasing this house while [others are] buying theirs" (*BGBS* 12). Deighton's lack of interest in the distinction between owning and renting is amazing to Silla and the other Bajans because it departs so completely from the standard precepts of masculine behaviour in general, and patriarchal behaviour in particular. Moses, Percy Challenor, and Jerome Johnson clearly view the movement from renter to home-owner as an essential step toward legitimacy, but

<sup>13</sup> His elation over the material possibilities of the land also collapses under the weight of Silla's disapproval, indicating the primacy of his emotional life over his material life. "[W]hat was the land, what did it mean if she did not believe in him?" (*BGBS* 26).

<sup>14</sup> In McGill's study, he notes that adult male friendships generally depend on some external justification that obscures the direct, emotional content of the relationship. The predominance of "work friends", "hockey team-mates", and "drinking buddies" indicates the degree to which some type of activity supersedes the emotional exchange.

Deighton seems to be completely indifferent to it. Or, perhaps more poignantly, he seems to view the purchasing of the brownstone as a kind of surrender, an abdication of his more deeply-prized hopes about his potential and his own future. Refusing the brownstone (and keeping the land) is, in a very significant way, refusing to give up the day for the few raw mouth pennies; it is, as Keith Byerman notes, a “refusal to turn dreams into objects of exchange” (142).

Of course, the traditional masculine model places very little value on internal entities like dreams and a great deal of emphasis on objects for material exchange. Consequently, Silla’s accusation that Deighton “ain no real real Bajan man” (*BGBS* 173), is (in a contextual if not a moral or philosophical sense) basically valid insofar as he shows very little of what might normally be called a real man’s behaviour. But, while Silla clearly means to morally condemn Deighton for failing to be a man in the traditional sense, Marshall does not, and her treatment of Deighton and his masculinity is much more subtle than many critics seem to recognize. The popular perception that Deighton is lazy and indifferent to his family’s welfare is, I think, unfair to Deighton and insensitive to the subtleties of Marshall’s characterization. Deighton is not interested in being an Old Testament patriarch (or at least not under the terms Marshall’s America seems to dictate). He doesn’t want to be Percy Challenor, but, despite Silla’s suggestions otherwise, that seems to be a very good thing. And, far from being a moral liability, Deighton’s idiosyncratic and personalized interest in his daughters operates as an emblem for moral and emotional survival and as a critique of Silla’s moral bankruptcy.

When Debra Schneider says that "Silla's situation is made more difficult by her husband's ideas about all things due to him as a man" (70), she seems to be blaming him for being, and for not being, a "real real Bajan man".<sup>15</sup> She blames him for being lazy and "lying down" (71), but it seems fairly obvious that her feminist critique would be equally unhappy with the kind of Spartan masculinity exemplified by Percy Challenor. This is, I think, pretty unfair and pretty short-sighted. More importantly, Schneider's argument deliberately shifts the blame from the nature of Silla's situation onto the nature of Deighton's ideas about manhood. It *is* true that Silla's desire to buy the Brownstone is disrupted by Deighton, but Schneider and others seem to wilfully misrepresent the validity of Silla's desire. The critical representations of Silla as "a perfect representative of the community of black women [who] embodies positive values" (Christol 149), as someone involved in a "fight for basic survival" (de Abruna 250), and as someone who "is not obsessed with status in the least" (Schneider 70) seem to me to be almost entirely unsupported by the text.<sup>16</sup> Silla says outright that "children ain nothing but a keepback" (BGBS 30), yet critics justify her pathology in terms of her preoccupation with her children. She says she wants her man to "make out like the rest" (BGBS 174) and later hopes to *follow* her friends into Crown Heights, yet Mary Helen Washington thinks Silla is "forging a path through unfamiliar territory, cutting brush for those behind her" (312).

<sup>15</sup> She is also, of course, blaming him for not being a real American man, insofar as she objects to his orientation relative to the value of hard work and material advancement.

<sup>16</sup> While such positive assessments are the norm (and even Marshall sometimes speaks of Silla in idealized ways), some critics, most notably Dorothy Hamer Denniston, have reluctantly acknowledged that Silla has become a kind of "monster" (16). This assessment is supported by the link to the Greek myth of the sea monster at Scylla, opposite Charybdis. Of course, Marshall's characters are often caught between Scylla and Charybdis, between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Of course, Silla's fight has very little to do with basic survival and a whole lot to do with "making a head-way" (*BGBS* 32), with social climbing and material advancement.

Almost everybody overlooks the fact that the central struggle in the novel is not to move a struggling family out of squalor and into decency; it's to purchase the house they are already living in. Silla craves a social, not a material, shift.<sup>17</sup> The much-talked-about children end up in the same house whether Silla gets her way or not. Any argument suggesting Silla's primary motivation is to help her children must account for the fact that the legal and social distinction between renting and owning do not have any impact at all on the living arrangements of Ina and Selina, aside from increased tension and the increased alienation of their father.

Still, even if Deighton is not a "real real Bajan man" according to a number of the usual standards, Marshall suggests that his behaviour is the result of several mutations of his vision of masculinity, not of his indifference to masculine principles. Even if Deighton is an unconventional father, he has been seduced by some fairly conventional masculine stories. Like Guy and Moses, he buys into several idealized visions of his masculinity, and his imaginary life arises directly out of his dissatisfaction with the life he is living. He is seen as "a dark god... who [has] fallen from his heaven and [lies] stunned on earth" (*BGBS* 52), and the collapse of this mythic status haunts him throughout the novel. A homeless deity, one who has shifted from "the sacred space"

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<sup>17</sup> Obviously, ownership suggests greater security, and, in some situations, mortgage rates can be lower than monthly rents, but none of this ever seems to make any impact in the novel. Selina's college tuition is free, and there are no suggestions that life becomes any easier after Silla buys the house. Indeed, insofar as there are any indications of increased prosperity since the purchase of the brownstone, they suggest that all the money has been re-routed toward Silla's new, and still very personal, goal of a bigger house in a better neighbourhood.

(Pavel 77) of an undemanding youth to the "profane reality" (Pavel 77) of his current situation, Deighton imagines heaven in terms of the past and the future, and this distracts him from the present. Because he is the last child, and, more significantly, "the only boy" (*BGBS* 32), Deighton's mother treats him as if "the sun rise and set 'pon" (*BGBS* 32) his every move while he is growing up. And, because his original conception of the universe is derived from his mother's perception of him (because the mother defines the limits of a child's universe during his formative years), Deighton is reared in a faulty narrative that posits him as the central, heroic, character. When his experiences as an adolescent and a young man shatter this story, he is "stunned" and unable to cope with the disjunction between the diminished opportunities of his present and the heroic visions of his past. His nostalgia for Barbados arises directly out of his nostalgia for a situation where the sun might rise and set upon his whims.

Thus, the land in Barbados is not just the stuff of idle and vainglorious dreaming; it is the centre of his emotional life and the source of his self-identification. The land represents the still-possible dream that people might say "Deighton Boyce is one man that makes money and lives good" (*BGBS* 85), and perhaps more poignantly, it represents his refusal to accept a land where he "doesn't exist fuh true" (*BGBS* 66). Admittedly, there is an element of materialism and machismo in these desires, but these are only manifestations of a much deeper desire to exist for real, for true. The anonymity of New York promotes his detachment from it, while the remembered significance of his youth reaffirms his imaginative attachment to home. The result is a kind of odd circle where Deighton is hiding from a reality that doesn't notice him in the first place, while

simultaneously pursuing a richly textured life in a place that doesn't really exist for him anymore, if it ever existed at all.

Just as the comic books of Guy Crouchback's youth leave him aching for combat as an adult, Deighton's childhood seduces him into thinking of himself in very narrow and restrictive ways. He envies the men he encounters in the street because "there was no question that they were truly men" (*BGBS* 37), and he marvels at their ability to "so easily prove it by flashing a knife or smashing out with their fists" (*BGBS* 37-8). A sensitive man, for whom such violent proofs are "alien" (*BGBS* 38), Deighton must find "other, more sanctioned, ways" (*BGBS* 38) of stabilizing his masculinity. The land is just such a proof. It represents his last chance at "something big" (*BGBS* 83), and something big seems necessary for his psychological survival, a fact that is made clear through the obvious parallels between its disappearance and Deighton's psychological dissolution. More directly, the correlation between the land and Deighton's masculinity is made explicit when he says, "I got big plans or nothing a-tall. That's the way a man does do things" (*BGBS* 83). Under such assumptions, it is not altogether surprising that he sees the trumpet as a way of achieving his dreams about the land, because the desire to see his "name in lights" (*BGBS* 85) is rooted in the same ontological space, the same seductive story, as the desire for the romantic home in Barbados. As a musician, he says, "you does get people respect...you's not just another somebody out here scuffling for a dollar" (*BGBS* 84). The constant desire for respect and the constant fear of being just another somebody result in some seriously deluded ideas about what constitutes effective action. He thinks of one far-fetched dream as the most plausible route toward the



realization of another, and this strategy guarantees the failure of both enterprises (if enterprise is even the right term for such thinly planned activities).

The ineffective nature of Deighton's approach to his dreams has been frequently and unfavourably compared with the hard-working, reduced, achievability of Silla's dream of (lower) middle-class housing,<sup>18</sup> but Marshall is careful to show that Deighton's different work-ethic arises not from any native laziness, but from a steadystream of encounters with his own limitations. Deighton is not really lazy,<sup>19</sup> even though he doesn't believe in the efficacy of hard-work. He doesn't believe his dreams are achievable through the standard practices of the American Dream and so he separates himself from it, but he's absolutely right to think the way that he does. His dreams will never be realized in New York, no matter how hard he tries. If he doesn't behave in a reasonable fashion, it is not so much that he is unreasonable, it's just that he clearly recognizes the unreasonable nature of his situation, and he quite reasonably believes he has no easy exit from it. When the coach tells the quarterback to throw a "Hail Mary" pass at the end of the game, he doesn't do it because he thinks it's a well-designed play: he does it because the time for well-designed plays has passed. The long-bomb pass is all that is left when another first down is meaningless. Similarly, Deighton's long-shot, low-odd efforts for high-paying accounting jobs and high-profile trumpet fame are not manifestations of any kind of fear of success or any lack of ambition. Quite the opposite, they are final, desperate efforts to redeem something that seems to be already lost. They

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<sup>18</sup> Denniston, for example, applauds Silla as a "stern pragmatist" (14), as opposed to the "romantic and imaginative" (14) tendencies of her husband.

<sup>19</sup> Too many readers tend to overlook the fact that Deighton *always* has a job (even after he no longer has a personality), and that he successfully completes his accounting course.

are the last efforts of a man for whom effort has come to naught, the last attempts of a man who has lost his belief in trying.

If Deighton doesn't believe in any American Dream along the lines of "try and you will succeed," Marshall makes it clear he has no cause to do so. As a young man in Barbados, he was mortified when the white clerks rejected his job application because their rejection "turned the years at school, and his attempts to be like them... into nothing" (*BGBS* 182). As an older man, he tries to retain the land and suffers a similar humiliation. Later still, his effort to complete the accounting course (while working full-time) amounts to nothing. I make no particular defence of the value of Deighton's projects, but the consistent destruction of all of his long-held, long-term goals should, I think, provoke the reader's sympathy. When years at school, months of restraint (he eventually proves he had several clear ideas about how to spend the money), and nights of study can be so swiftly and completely erased, it seems downright sensible to stop trying, or at least stop trying in the conventional sense. Even Silla recognizes this when she says:

It's a terrible thing to know that you gon be poor all yuh life no matter how hard you work. You does stop trying after a time. People does see you so and call you lazy. But it ain laziness. It just that you does give up. You does kind of die inside. (*BGBS* 70)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In situations like the above, Silla demonstrates the degree to which she *is* capable of subtle and sympathetic feeling: she is not, it seems, natively insensitive or brutal. Like a lot of masculine individuals, she just learns to view sensitivity as weakness. In her essay about the relationship between "brass balls" masculinity and "the discourse of capitalism" (33), Andrea Greenbaum outlines a position similar to Silla's when she says that "'feminine' values-- compassion, nurturance, empathy -- are threatening to the men's

Silla's idea of tragedy is defined almost exclusively in terms of money and property, but her assessment (which she eventually seems to forget) is equally appropriate to Deighton's more nuanced hopes and dreams. He gives up and he dies by degrees, first surrendering work-ethic, then surrendering dreams, then ego, then his family, and finally his body.

His "hard day's work out there on Fifth Avenue in New York" (*BGBS* 130) represents the final stand of his spirit where, for a day, he occupies the role he has imagined all his life. The white store clerks he encounters in New York clearly evoke their predecessors in Barbados, but, because "money does talk sweet" (*BGBS* 124), the new clerks "almost break their neck running to wait 'pon" (*BGBS* 125) him. This kind of momentary vindication is obviously exhilarating to Deighton, and he gives breathless accounts of the joys of being served and called "sir." In short, he ignores a number of respected sages and tries to live his life in a single day. Many critics have rightly noted the strong element of egoism in Deighton's actions and have, perhaps rightly, condemned his excesses as vainglorious and selfish. It seems impossible to contest a lot of this, but it is important to remember that Deighton categorically rejects the truly selfish and available act of leaving the family altogether. Instead, he buys presents for his children (and his wife) which reflect several deep-rooted, and subtly-realized connections with them. The gifts he buys for Ina and Selina arise directly out of his careful consideration of their individual personalities and out of his vividly remembered recollections of the times he has spent with them. Despite Ina's fears that he has

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business ethos" (36), that "success in [the American] capitalist framework comes at a steep price—the obliteration of compassion, loyalty and trustworthiness" (37).

forgotten her in his heart, Deighton specifically locates her most prized memory when he recalls how they “used to walk ‘bout downtown looking in the people window when [she] was small” (*BGBS* 126), and he selects a dress that causes her to “smile luminously” (*BGBS* 127) despite her mother’s condemnation. He is similarly subtle and reflective in his relationship with Selina. The gift-certificate for the books arises directly out of a single moment in the past when she said she wanted “[b]ooks that would be [hers], that [she] wun have to take back to these people library” (*BGBS* 127). In both cases, Deighton’s behaviour is so pathetically beautiful that one has to wilfully misread to miss it. The precision of his memory and the thoughtfulness of his choices reflect a kind of deep-rooted, long-standing, keenly-sensed love that I have rarely seen in fiction. His actions are not those of an aloof, ego-driven pater, but of doting, other-driven maternal figure trying to deal with the shame of things he has failed to deliver to his children. They reveal the degree to which he has been preoccupied with gaining their approval and with providing them with beautiful things. At the very least, his consideration of their needs and desires is much closer to the mark, and much less self-possessed, than Silla’s. In the end, he is absolutely right when he tells his wife that it is only she who is “not satisfy” (*BGBS* 132) with the way he has spent the money. In a very important sense, he gives his family a single day’s pleasure in place of something that most of them didn’t even want in the first place.

This said, the single-day’s excess causes Silla to further “steel her heart” (*BGBS* 131) against him, and forms the root of her eventually successful efforts to see him “dead-dead at [her] feet” (*BGBS* 131). Thus, even though the keenly felt emotional

moment is productive in its own terms, it has tragic contextual results insofar as it awakens and aggravates a ruthless power that eventually destroys him. Crudely, Deighton's emotionalism leads to a material inefficiency that courts the wrath of the American Dream. This is not surprising since most of Deighton's problems arise from his refusal to surrender, or seriously modify, his vision of himself in the face of Marshall's American society. Because he is preoccupied with the intangible promises of his youth, and because he insists on the value of "taking his ease," he is eventually crushed physically and spiritually by the machine force of a materialistic culture which is most poignantly embodied in the ethos and the actions of his wife. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Deighton's inward focus is punished by the thoroughgoing externalism of those around him. His attempt to keep the most vital parts of himself "well hidden" from the City of New York is finally unsuccessful, and, fittingly, he dies on the day the war is won. The explicit parallel between the epic victory and the barely-noted tragedy re-emphasizes the efficacy of the active and the orderly, and suggests the probable fate of passive dreamers. While the country applauds the achievements of its brave, fighting men, Deighton gives up the fight altogether, sinks to the bottom of the sea and, appropriately, disappears.

But, if *Brown Girl, Brownstones* suggests that the father's effort to retain a private emotional self is a doomed and dangerous one, *Praisesong For the Widow* illustrates that the abdication of this self is equally undesirable. In both novels, the husband's approach to the family's living quarters becomes emblematic of his overall approach to his life, and his orientation with regard to the father's role in particular. Deighton's indifference about

the brownstone is the result of his preoccupation with his own internal life, while Jay Johnson's memories of the apartment of Halsey Street "figure[] in some way in nearly everything he [does]" (*PSIW* 88). The direct substitution of property for his own individuality, the degree to which the apartment determines what he thinks and does, eventually results in his unconscious assumption of the traditional role of father and husband such that he becomes a formal, two-name entity, even to his own wife.<sup>21</sup> The movement from the sensual Jay, to the distant formality of Jerome Johnson parallels his emotional retreat and eventually leaves him as a kind of stoic, non-entity defined by his material successes and non-existent in every other area.

But, just as Marshall carefully delineates the sources of Deighton's material inactivity, her treatment of Jay's spiritual disappearance emphasizes the divergent pressures that force him, or at least roughly push him, into making the sacrifices he makes. Under the weight of financial pressures that far surpass anything presented in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and faced with the real threat of poverty and homelessness, the relationship between the pregnant Avey and the over-worked Jay begins to break down. Avey becomes paranoid about Jay's faithfulness as a result of his almost constant absence and her captivity in the apartment, while Jay understandably resents Avey's accusation of infidelity because it arises directly out of his incredible efforts to provide for her and for his family. As Guilia Scarpa correctly notes, the situation is one where

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<sup>21</sup> While the distinction between "Jay" and "Jerome Johnson" is an important and effective one in the novel, it produces several referential and stylistic challenges for critical analysis. I have tried, as much as possible, to maintain the sharp separation between the two entities, but, insofar as I am attempting to deal directly with the switch from one to the other, some necessary confusion arises. The later stages of "Jay" might just as easily be called the early stages of "Jerome Johnson". Some degree of reader-tolerance will probably be necessary to sort this out.

"the social dynamic is internalized and transformed into an interpersonal dynamic" (Scarpa 98). The urgent materiality of their poverty undermines their spiritual bond such that Jay and Avey begin to feel financial pressures in ways that manifest themselves in their romantic lives.

In her handling of the scene that gives rise to Jerome Johnson, Marshall makes a clear correlation between financial instability and romantic dissolution. She shows that the aggression Jay and Avey direct at each other arises out of the pressures of their financial situation. In so doing, she exposes the reader to the seductive logic that eventually overwhelms Jay and, to a lesser extent, Avey. Because poverty is situated at the very centre of the romantic problem, waging war on poverty seems like a viable strategy for emotional survival. The lesson Jay takes from "that near fatal Tuesday" (*PSW* 113) is not that he has failed to love, but that he has failed to provide. The young Jay *is* in touch with his emotions, and it is exactly this familiarity that convinces him that the problems in their marriage must arise from their poverty. Because he knows he loves his wife, and he wants to retain this love, he attempts to remove the most serious obstacle in the way of their marriage.

To me, this logic seems pretty sound, and in a pretty real sense the Johnsons are characters in a "consummate American success story of financial achievement... as a result of hard work and sacrifice" (Pettis 17). The problem, of course, is that, however attractive it seems, the story isn't finally that good, or, at the very least, it doesn't finally deliver the happiness it promised. Marshall's painful demonstration of Jay's collapse makes it clear that Jay is not an idiot, an emotional retard, or a natively acquisitive

character; he's a smart person who got on the wrong narrative track, who succumbed to "the seduction of another's values" ("Interview" 4). Jay's intelligence, his "emotionally availability," and interest in music and history are directly at odds with bland consumerism, yet, given the options he perceives before him, he is finally unable to resist the machinations of a narrative based almost entirely on capital.

Marshall suggests that the tragedy of Jay's life is the result not of any tragic flaw, but of his failure to cut the Gordian knot that constitutes his social and historical position. More directly, she posits Jay as "an embattled swimmer caught in the eye of two currents moving powerfully in opposite directions" (*PSW* 111) in order to illustrate the difficulty of compromise or accommodation. The comparison to the swimmer emphasizes the degree to which Jay exists inside two countervailing pressures. He does not create the current even though it surrounds him, and he does not finally choose a direction; rather, one of the currents comes to "claim him" (*PSW* 111). More importantly, the swimming metaphor undermines the possibility that Jay might have reconciled his divergent impulses, that he might have done differently. Avey later imagines that they could have preserved "the most vivid [and] most valuable part of themselves" (*PSW* 139) and kept their personalities distinct from their material ascendance, but swimmers don't have this luxury. They're either in the water, or they aren't. The static tension of Jay's position on that Tuesday can be resolved only when one side, or the other, determines the direction of his life.

The resolution of that Tuesday is that Jay abandons his own individuality in a way that is just as pronounced, though not as dramatic, as Deighton's decisions to join Father



Peace and, later, to kill himself. The unusual mustache, which once "served to screen his private self" (*PSW* 93) from his public persona, eventually becomes a "nuisance" (*PSW* 130) to Jerome, because he no longer has a private self to screen. The loss of the mustache represents his abdication of "the last trace of everything distinctive and special" (*PSW* 130) about him, and is the culmination of a long process in which all of the things "that had once been important to him, that... had restored him at the end of the day, [find] themselves on the sidelines, out of his line of vision" (*PSW* 115). Books on career building and selling techniques replace the blues records and the story of the Ibos, and sex becomes "a leg-iron which slowed him in the course he had set for himself" (*PSW* 129). The result of all of these internal sacrifices is the appearance of Jerome Johnson, a kind of archetypal family man, a man defined completely by his public persona, and one who expresses real contempt for anybody else's self-expression. He ceases to be the man who staged "ridiculous dances... whenever the mood struck him" (*PSW* 123) and becomes one who wants to "close down every dancehall in Harlem" (*PSW* 132). His regression into a life that operates only "according to a harsh and joyless ethic" (*PSW* 131), is one which directly aligns his spiritual disappearance with his abdication of all things which "matter little to the world" (*PSW* 136). In his desire to succeed as father-provider, Jay allows the exterior world to overwhelm his interior life, and, as Suggie warns Selina in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, success in these terms comes at too high a price. "When you hear the shout you wun be able to call your soul your own" (*BGBS* 207).

The differences between Deighton and Jay, are, finally defined in terms of their attempts to handle the publicly sanctioned role of father/provider. When Jerome Johnson hears the shout, he can call his home his own, but his soul is an entirely different matter. Deighton hopelessly attempts to defend his soul, to call it his own, but the weight of maintaining this soul is finally too much for him. While Jerome Johnson dies without his soul, Deighton's soul (characterized by the persistence of his deeply personal hopes and fears) is the agent of his demise. One becomes harsh and joyless, while the other is finally too soft to survive. Neither chooses a productive path, yet the alternatives they suggest to each other are equally unsatisfying. Marshall's version of the American Dream destroys both characters; the only question is how they are to be destroyed, from inside, or outside, its narrative frame. The tragedy in each man's life results from his inability to find a neutral space between selling, and having to defend, his soul. Neither man can finally negotiate between blues records and business English, between trumpets and terms of sale. Marshall suggests that neither one strikes a productive balance because neither one has the "will and ...cunning necessary... to take only what [is] needed and to run" (*PSW* 139), but, even in this idealized case, flight remains a dominant motif.

In these novels, the role of the father inside the American Dream is constantly rendered in terms of retreat and escape. Both Deighton and Jay hide themselves behind public images; Deighton seeks sexual oblivion; the soul of Jay Johnson slips "quietly out of the room [and] out of their lives" (*PSW* 136); an ecstatic Deighton says "I am nothing" (*BGBS* 169) to Father Peace, and both men, consciously or otherwise, finally view their material or spiritual non-existence as a mode of liberation from the pressures

they feel. Stuck inside a seemingly unavoidable storyline, they finally avoid and erase large pieces of themselves instead.

### **The Feminine Father: Silla as Archetypal Pater**

Given the nature of this predicament, and the prevalence of the desire for escape, it seems amazing that there should be so much interest in who gets to inherit the role of masculine father-figure. Deighton and Jay both seem to emphasize the pernicious and pervasive difficulties that arise when men try to negotiate between the demands of their internal selves and the demands of their role as father/provider, yet the scramble to claim this position affects both characters and critics. In both cases, the scramble is the result of some preoccupation with the relative powers and freedoms of men and women.

As I've attempted to suggest several times, the idea that social role eclipses internal self is one that arises directly out of achievements of feminist discourse. Feminist thought has illustrated the degree to which traditional, restrictive and fictionalized roles can overwhelm a person's ability to recognize and pursue some more individually-directed version of self. This has been no small achievement, but the emphasis on breaking down out-moded fictions has, I think, limited our ability to consider carefully the implications of our actions once we have broken out.<sup>22</sup> Like the

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<sup>22</sup> To be sure, this difficulty is not limited to feminists. In her compelling book, *The War Against Boys*, Christina Hoff Sommers suggests that the process of freeing boys from their traditional roles often results in a dubious effort encouraging them to act more like girls. Similarly, certain modes of feminism applaud women for, essentially, taking over the male role. Switching from one bogus role to another is, of course, not real advancement, and insofar as we "free" people from their old roles, we must be careful that we are not selling the same old story to a new group of people.

American experiment, the feminist project has sought to liberate people from regressive institutions, but, just as the American ideal of freedom can collapse into Darwinism, the feminist preoccupation with liberation has sometimes led us to applaud any female action which attempts to conquer and subdue the world. If the problem with contemporary America arises from a confusion between "freedom of the individual" and "always getting what we want," the problem with some versions of contemporary feminism arises from similar unwillingness to distinguish between productive and unproductive "girl power." While the feminist project has succeeded in its attempts to demonstrate what women *can* do, its examination of what women should do has been more suspect. In its attempt to champion women's liberty, feminist thought has been too reluctant to delineate between productive and unproductive behaviours. In the worst cases, feminist critics seem to applaud female characters as examples of strong, independent womanhood when, in fact, their behaviour seems to arise out of the kind of power-oriented, morally-vacuous, single-mindedness of purpose that we usually associate with a regressive kind of masculinity. Silla Boyce is one such case. In this section, I posit Silla Boyce as the patriarch of the Boyce household, and investigate the fundamentally masculine<sup>23</sup> nature of her convictions and her behaviour. Implicit in such an investigation, is a fairly serious critique of those branches of feminist thought which seem to posit a traditional version of masculinity as the fulfillment of liberated womanhood.

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<sup>23</sup> As ever, I am not attempting to justify or validate either "masculine" or "feminine" behaviour, just to investigate the degree to which certain characters tend to function under the assumptions of certain stories. As such, I am not saying "Silla acts like a man," but rather, "Silla seems to have absorbed several aspects of the masculine narrative." This distinction avoids the problems that arise out of any "gender essentialist" view of things.

As I suggested earlier in this chapter, the father figure is at the very centre of the stable, traditional version of the family unit. His authority establishes the system of relations inside the household, and that authority is itself derived through his interactions with the outside world, through his successes or failures in his primary capacity as breadwinner. This outward focus on the protection and advancement of the family is frequently accompanied by a similarly well-developed phobia about showing "softness" and emotion. The result is the kind of publicly respected, privately unknown figure most of us know both through artificially constructed stories (in books and movies) and through personal experience.

But, the declining significance of the nuclear family has had a major impact on the idea of the father figure. A major consequence of this decline, or perhaps a major cause of it, has been the shift in the system of relations inside various households. The collapse of the stable family has precipitated (or been precipitated by) the collapse of the stable father figure and this has in turn led to several key differences in terms of the distribution of authority within the home. The redistribution of power inside the family results from substantial shifts in temporal and physical space, from changes in era and changes in area. The forward march of history brings changes in normative belief structures, while migration patterns, because they bring disparate cultures together, reshape many of the immigrant's (and, to a lesser extent, the host's) most basic assumptions. In particular, female immigrants from more traditional (and hence probably more male-dominated) cultures find their social positions radically changed when they reach "the new world" where the operative narrative frameworks tend to have fewer

important variables. Frequently, these changes are for the better, at least as far as the dynamic in the family is concerned.

In her study of West Indian immigrants in New York City, Patricia Pessar notes that many women have felt that the "status as wage earner has improved their position in the household and modified their orientation to an eventual return" (Pessar 103) to their native countries.<sup>24</sup> This much is surely the case with Silla, who embraces America as the land where she has a chance to succeed. While her husband has fond memories of his privileged youth on the island, the poverty and the social restrictions of Silla's childhood in Barbados make her predisposed to accept the promises of New York City. Her pathological interest in buying property in her new environment has clear links to her past, where property might always have been out of reach. Silla has some very positive experiences in New York with regard to her status inside and outside the family, and these positive moments instill in her the desire to "rise up in this man country."

This keen sense of opportunity runs in direct opposition to her husband's keen sense of defeat. While her adult life rescues her from the squalor of her youth and strengthens her desire to act, the mediocrity of his life in New York crushes Deighton's efficacy and leads him into several reveries about the dreams and potentials of his past. Because an individual's orientation to the new culture seems to depend largely on that individual's orientation to the old one, New York City operates as both an emblem of opportunity and an emblem of defeat. More importantly for Silla and Deighton, New

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<sup>24</sup> Pessar does not deal directly with Barbadians in her study, and I do not wish to obscure the key differences between the various nations that comprise the West Indies. Nonetheless, I feel that certain aspects of Pessar's study have direct relevance to Silla's position, and that this relevance supports Foner's suggestion that "despite island rivalries" many West Indians share "a broadly similar cultural and linguistic background" (Foner 210).

York obscures the stable system of relations that governed their pasts, and, in so doing, undermines their traditional orientations relative to each other. And, even if the traditional structures are restrictive and ought to be forsaken, there is a disturbing sense of disorientation and flux that comes with the “freedom” of the new situation.<sup>25</sup> In New York, the sun does not rise on Deighton’s wishes, and there is no “woman called a Driver” (*BGBS* 45) to abuse Silla. Instead, both are unknown entities who are established and defined, like Moses and the boys before them, in terms of their ability to earn money.

To Silla, this situation registers as an opportunity to act while, to Deighton, it creates pressure to perform heroic deeds. Silla’s ability to fulfill some of her more moderate goals acts as an implicit rebuke against Deighton, who has failed to realize any of his grandiose plans. When Silla earns a bit of money she feels empowered, while a similar amount of money (and a similar absence of prestige) leaves Deighton feeling defeated. And, without any traditional framework to reinforce Deighton’s authority within the house, he quickly yields the position of pater to his more industrious wife, and recedes (if that is the word) into a self-consciously passive role in the house. Indeed, he feels the same kind of “unnatural acceptance” (*BGBS* 115) for this disappointment as he does for all of the reductions which precede and follow it. Accepting that such defeats are “simply his due” (*BGBS* 115), he comes to believe in the natural superiority of his wife, a woman who, in her power and her omniscience, is aligned specifically with God (*BGBS* 24). This sense of native inferiority to spouse is, of course, the traditional burden of the married woman. The fact that Deighton feels the same way illustrates the degree

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<sup>25</sup> As indicated in the introduction, Worthington views the collapse of stable structures as a major source of anxiety and a disincentive to effective action. Deighton’s case seems to support this view.

to which the traditional roles have been reversed in the Boyce household, a place where the husband is openly mocked for having hopes and dreams by his hard-nosed, hard-working wife.<sup>26</sup>

As an emblem of strong womanhood, Silla actually comes across as an archetypal male figure, someone with a hard and joyless ethic that far surpasses Jerome Johnson's. On a hot summer day that shuts the entire neighbourhood down, Silla is the "only one who [does] not succumb to the day's torpor" (*BGBS* 52). Instead, she becomes a kind of caricature of the distant father figure, sitting alone, "cool, alert [and] holding the newspaper" (*BGBS* 52). She admires Percy Challenor for having achieved the status of being "nothing but a work horse" (*BGBS* 54), and Selina specifically links the two together when she says, "I can't imagine [Beryl's] father ever being small, or my mother either" (*BGBS* 59). Here, Selina avoids the much more obvious correlation between the two fathers, and substitutes her mother because Deighton's emotional availability, and his boyish excitement make his childhood readily accessible to her. The same is not true of "the mother,"<sup>27</sup> who is characterized in terms of her forbidding distance and her absolute, indifferent, authority. Early in the novel, Marshall uses Silla's statements as Old Testament-style epigraphs to illustrate Silla's propensity for harsh and heartless judgment. Later, the correlation between Percy and Silla encourages the reader to think of her as "a pagan deity of wrath" (*BGBS* 54) and to see her children as "subjects

<sup>26</sup> Deighton's various interests in his appearance, in buying gifts for his children and, most poignantly, in returning to his native land, all meet with Silla's disapproval because she, in her role as patriarch, has no time for such intangibles.

<sup>27</sup> Several critics have noted the significance of the perpetual narrative decision to refer to Silla as "the" mother, rather than the more personal "her". Of course, such a strategy collapses intimacy and invites comparison to more formal and distant structures of authority, most significantly, God the father.



cowering before the fire flaring from [her] nostrils" (*BGBS* 54). In several situations, most poignantly the one involving Deighton's gifts, Selina and Ina feel compelled to place their fear of Silla's retribution above their individual wants and needs.

Of course, their fear of retribution is very well-founded because Silla does operate with all of the caprice, malice and might of a classical deity. Bluntly, she is the goddess of heartless materialism and she visits tragedy upon those who fail to worship. The repeated efforts of feminist critics to redeem Silla as a devoted mother<sup>28</sup> cannot finally stand up against the weight of her crimes, all of which are committed in the name of her two-pronged mission: the destruction of the human spirit, and the pursuit of material advancement. If Silla had *only* sold the land, it might be possible to think she is obsessed with her family's well-being and that this obsession leads her to questionable actions. But this isn't what happens at all. Selling the land is just one instance of Silla's thoroughgoing attempt to destroy the emotional support-systems of everyone around her. When she destroys Deighton's imaginary life in Barbados, she doesn't leave him alone; she goes after his new life with Father Peace. When Suggie uses the sex act to "nullify the long week... and the lonely room" (*BGBS* 35), Silla has her evicted as a prostitute. When Ina becomes religious, Silla tries to undermine her spirituality. When Selina is in the theatre dancing, she tells Rachel that her mother is more likely to "take apart this building bare-handed" (*BGBS* 277) than to encourage her talents. Silla applauds Clive's mother for burning his paintings and mocks him for having "tears in his eyes" (*BGBS*

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<sup>28</sup> At the very least, these critics include Mary Helen Washington, Helene Christol, Keith Byerman, and Deborah Schneider. Unexamined pro-Silla sentiment also troubles most of the other articles written about *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

259). Most distressing of all, she intentionally destroys the last mementoes of an old woman's life, in order to encourage an unprofitable tenant to her death.<sup>29</sup> In every case, Silla seeks out the root of someone's emotional survival and attempts to destroy it. She usually succeeds. Having wilfully sent her own soul "howling into hell" (*BGBS* 75), Silla moves on to the souls of others. Her actions lead to the death of her husband, the steady "retreat" (*BGBS* 300) of her daughter Ina, and the flight of Selina. On the other side of the equation there's the promise of suburban housing.

Silla's preoccupation with the material and her disdain for the spiritual does not, on its own, justify the conclusion that she is the family's patriarch, but, taken in tandem with several other revealing factors, the case is very strong. Silla is not only a distant, wage-earning woman, she's also got several tyrannical, archetypally paternal, obsessions. Her clear preference for her deceased "boy child" (*BGBS* 30) over her existing daughters reflects a patriarch's desire for a male heir,<sup>30</sup> and it is eventually suggested that the lost son has "underscored each harsh word and ... every harsh act" (*BGBS* 176) Silla aims at her husband. Contextually, this is an almost medieval punishment of the wife who fails to provide an heir. Silla's sexual indifference to her partner is matched by her obsession with the chastity of her daughters, an obsession that, characteristically, can only be expressed in the form of threats. Her preoccupations with her daughters' purity and with the threat of "wild dog puppies" (*BGBS* 42) are, of course, quintessentially masculine

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<sup>29</sup> The above is by no means a complete list. She also rewards Ina for spying on her father, and derides Miss Thompson for caring for "somebody else's wild-dog puppies" (*BGBS* 27). Denniston says that Silla "withholds affection in order to forge character in her daughter" (25), but the majority of the evidence suggests the opposite: Silla withholds affection to destroy character.

<sup>30</sup> At one key moment in the novel, Selina tells Silla "I'm not him" (*BGBS* 47) because she is frustrated by her mother's consistent tendency to regard her as a mere substitute for her dead brother.

insofar as they assume each girl's inability to choose, while simultaneously assuming and enforcing the father's authority with the threat of sending the powerless "out in the streets" (*BGBS* 42), a hostile act for which Silla acquires a particular taste.

### **Competition and Community: Escape From and/or Into Value**

Because this is so obviously the case, it is distressing when people like Mary Helen Washington insist on viewing Silla as both a feminist icon and "the avatar of the community's deepest values and needs" (*BGBS* 315). Given Silla's behaviour, one hopes Washington is wrong, but, if she's right, what are the community's values and needs and how "deep" are they? If the community's ethos is embodied in Silla, then the community members can hope to find no escape from the inequities of American life, just a pathological desire to "adopt the same single-minded selfish values of their detractors" (Denniston 23). These values include the intentional destruction of those "that still ain got a penny to their name" (*BGBS* 103) and the belief that love is something well-worth sacrificing for "a dollar in [the] hand" (*BGBS* 103). They also involve unmotivated malice against the weak, and a steadfast refusal to feel sorrow or shame.

How such behaviours can be reconciled with anything positive, is, to me, a mystery, but, despite Silla's consistently reprehensible actions, Helene Christol manufactures a view of Silla that sees her as part of a "nurturing community" (Christol 150) of women who are intent on passing "on to their children their culture, language, traditions, and their determination to resist" (Christol 150). This is, of course, pure

fabrication. Silla is none of the things Christol suggests. She is contemptuous of culture. She's prone to brooding silence. She does everything she can to *sell* the land in Barbados, and she is obsessed with keeping up with the Joneses. She gives up her youthful interest in dancing and she has only two modes of linguistic expression: silence and the tongue-lashing. She succeeds in *disinheriting* Deighton (and, by extension, her own children), and, far from resisting, she adheres exactly to a grand narrative about American consumerism and does everything she can to follow it.

In the end, Silla is a really dubious choice as feminist or postcolonial avatar because she corresponds so exactly to the archetypal male role as patriarch, a role that is characteristically devoid of emotional content and rich in material preoccupation. She sacrifices every spiritual dimension in her own life in order to achieve certain material, culturally sanctioned, ends, and her obsession with material things leaves her unable to distinguish between a physical reality like "house" and a more intangible concept like "home." As a result, she maintains a highly sanitized, but thoroughly unliveable building, and her only ambition for the future is to reduplicate the problems of the brownstone in Crown Heights.

But, even if Washington and others are wrong to consider Silla as a positive force in the novel, they are, in an ironic way, correct to think of Silla as a representative of the community's most important values. The problem is with the merit of the values themselves. Cecil Osbourne's speech at the Association meeting provides a telling synopsis of Silla's, and the community's, approach when he says, "We ain white yet ... But we got our eye on the big time" (*BGBS* 221). As this statement suggests, the

community's deepest values are, in fact, non-values. Or, put another way their only values lie in material value. Their greatest hope is not for the elevation of their culture and their race, but for the means with which to *erase* these factors by more closely mimicking the "big-shot white executives ... in their expensive clubs" (*BGBS* 221).

In her study of West Indian immigrants in New York, Linda Basch notes that "voluntary societies" play an important role in immigrant life by "providing an arena in which the group can reaffirm its traditional heritage and ethnicity in an alien context" (Basch 162), but this is exactly what does not happen in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Instead, the Association becomes a society which is primarily devoted to successfully *acquiring* the values of the alien society. In Marshall's American context, this is virtually synonymous with acquiring wealth and/or property. The ethnic debate that takes place at the Association meeting underscores the fact that, in the Barbadian Homeowners Association, homeownership is more important than being Barbadian. While there are differing opinions about the necessity of racial and cultural unity, the significance of property remains unchallenged.<sup>31</sup>

And, just as Silla's preoccupation with the material eventually manifests itself as hostility toward the spiritual, the Association's acquisitive nature eventually perverts and distorts its own cultural traditions, and leaves its members with a singular and inescapable obsession with the material. When Deighton is deliberately and uniformly rejected by the dancers at the wedding, the Association uses its cultural heritage as an

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<sup>31</sup> Indeed, redemptive interpretations of the novel depend upon Selina's rejection of the Association's values at the end of the novel. Her decision *not* to abuse those closest to her for personal gain, and her willingness to simply discard the silver bangle binding her to her mother (while simultaneously maintaining connection through another one) represent productive efforts to complicate the one-dimensional approach of the Association, and to pursue some kind of real emotional and psychological freedom.

expression of hostility against a man who has failed to accept the parameters of the American Dream. When the dancers at the party use their backs to “form[] a wall against him” (150), they use a cultural expression of life, beauty, joy, and sex to censure Deighton for his interest in the very factors that gave (and should give) rise to the dance in the first place. Lloyd W. Brown perceptively views the novel in terms of “the life force,” which is embodied by Deighton, and “the machine force,” embodied by Silla. Under such a framework, Brown believes that

The machine-like force of the immigrants’ inflexible purpose has really mechanized the calypso. The calypso is, intrinsically, a rhythm symbol of the life-force. But the ritual expulsion at the wedding party (in effect an exclusion from the sexual rites of the life-force) transforms the calypso into an instrument of the immigrants’ determination to secure... material rewards. (161)

In effect, the dancers punish Deighton because he is too interested in things like dancing.<sup>32</sup> They are finally unable to reconcile the life-force with their preoccupations with the material. As a result, materialism does not just dwarf cultural matters, it launches an insidious attack against all things spiritual. For the Association’s members, even dancing becomes an expression of the desire for property. Like Avey and Jay

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<sup>32</sup> The Association’s contempt for aesthetics is re-emphasized in their treatment of Clive, who is ridiculed because he is “a man that wun work! That does call heself painting pictures,” a predilection which is linked with the belief that he is “hiding from work with tears in his eyes” (259). The disinclination for work, and the open expression of emotion compromise his masculinity and, as Greenbaum suggests, “to *not* be masculine (sans “balls”) is to be feminine” (36). As a result, Clive is rejected by the Association as an emblem of defeat, an obstacle to be avoided and repressed. Like Deighton, he is reviled as a feminized man: both seem to re-emphasize the basic masculine assumption that “women [in this case unmasculine men] stand in direct opposition to the fulfillment of the American Dream—the ability to make something out of nothing” (Greenbaum 39).

Johnson, they have failed to maintain anything vital and sacred in themselves. The result is the empty, endless, and pointless pursuit of material signifiers which will finally and inevitably disappoint them.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, when Scarpa suggests that Deighton suffers because "there is no safe harbour in which to take shelter from the outside world" (98), she identifies a communal, not just an individual, problem. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, almost nobody finds shelter of any kind. The Association misses the opportunity to provide a safe harbour, and instead reinforces the pressures of the outside world. In the end, the Association is not an emblem of cultural survival, but of cultural surrender; it does not offer any escape from the grand narrative, just a more mechanized and explicit strategy of pursuing it. And, although the novel's final pages suggest that Selina might be able to escape the binary opposition of her parents and make some productive compromise, it is important to remember that this possibility must be pursued away from the Association and away from New York. Because this is so, Selina's decision to leave her home is not really a decision to contend with the grand narrative of the city; it is a decision to explore some new avenues of retreat. As with Guy and Moses before her, her greatest potential lies in her willingness to reject, and escape from, the unproductive stories that seek to direct and control her life.

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<sup>33</sup> The tone of Marshall's novels is almost uniformly critical of insidious materialism, but this argument does not wish to suggest that material possessions are the root of the novel's, or contemporary America's problems. As Michael Schudson suggests in his fine essay "Delectable Materialism: Second Thoughts on a Consumer Culture," "there is dignity and rationality in people's desire for material goods" (354). The problem is never really in the goods themselves, but in people's tendency to prioritize them above other factors. We must recognize, as Silla and Jay finally do not, that "possession is an inappropriate aim of life, however valuable a means" (Schudson 356).

This willingness to reject dominant narratives and to retreat into productive spiritual spaces finds its fullest expression in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Although *Brown Girl, Brownstones* closes with the suggestion of escape in a single individual, *Praisesong* uses cultural withdrawal as an emblem for spiritual survival. The Excursion also acts as a specific critique of the activities and values of the Association. While the Association devotes itself exclusively toward material advancement, the Excursion is a journey into material obscurity. It takes people from a larger to a smaller island, and leaves them in a physical space that is "so small scarcely anybody has ever heard of it" (*PSW* 76). The movement *out* of public visibility confuses the other islanders who associate large scale excitement with large-scale enterprise. Avey's cab driver cannot understand the attraction of the Excursion, and he is positively frustrated by the way the Carriacou people treat their journey home as if it were a really important trip, as if they were "in a decent boat [going] to America or England or someplace" (*PSW* 76). As with the Association members in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, the cab driver's sense of himself is directly linked to some preoccupation with public, material visibility such that the transparent visibility of places (or, more properly, *concepts*) like "America" and "England" is used to negate, or at least undercut, the significance of the Excursion. Too completely immersed in the certain epic stories, the cab-driver recognizes neither the contingency of his own story, nor the legitimacy of the story the out-islanders are writing for themselves.

Of course, the Excursion is not *supposed* to make sense in terms of grand narratives because it is, by definition, an excursion, an escape, from them. When Avey



asks Lebert Joseph if there is any "special reason" (*PSW* 164) for the Excursion, he has difficulty responding to the question because, for him, the answers are so deep, so multifarious and so obvious. Irritated, he tells her the Excursion has "many special reasons" (*PSW* 164) and goes on to give a sweeping list where each item has something to do with maintaining and affirming the value of place and tradition.<sup>14</sup> Primarily, the Excursion seeks to strengthen the links between family members and to pay respect to departed ancestors. Such connections make it possible for Lebert Joseph to recount his "family history... like some Old Testament prophet" (*PSW* 163). They also make him intimately aware of the features and values of all the other "peoples" on the island. The thoroughly deracinated, de-cultured, suburbanized Avey can do none of this. And, if her question about the Excursion startles Lebert Joseph, his question, "What you is?" (*PSW* 166) startles and baffles Avey even more. The significance of Avey's inability to answer to what she is, is, I think, fairly obvious. Her slavish pursuit of the grand narrative, of the American Dream, has eclipsed her connection with her heritage in Tatem and destroyed her sense of self. Indeed, Marshall makes her character's degeneration explicit when Avey's doctor notes that the inability to recognize one's self in the mirror is "a sure sign... of money in the bank" (49). Avey has failed to fulfill the mission her Aunt had "entrusted" to her by "instilling the story of the Ibos in her" (*PSW* 42), and has instead internalized a different story, one that undermines her connection to anything but the material and leaves her "digging in with her shoe heels" (*PSW* 43) because she can

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<sup>14</sup> His list is filled with references to his family, his ancestors and his ancestral home, and his frustration with Avey closely mimics Deighton's frustration with Selina when he tries to establish the merits of his activities as a boy. In both cases, the men are insisting upon the value of processes which seem transparently unimportant to their listeners.

appeal to nothing more substantial. Lebert Joseph, operating under a completely different set of narrative assumptions, cannot believe that a character like Avey is even possible and invites her to come with him and experience the excursion.

The journey to Carriacou operates as a symbolic representation of the tumult associated with switching narrative allegiance. Although the Carriacou people find the sea to be relatively calm, Avey finds the journey to be extremely unsettling, and the almost ritual processes of defecation and regurgitation illustrate the degree to which Avey's internal processes are inconsistent with those of the Excursion. The purging process reinforces the earlier situation in the hotel where "her mind, like her pocketbook had been emptied of [its] contents [creating] a *tabula rasa* upon which a whole new history could be written" (*PSW* 151). The direct correlation between pocketbook and mind illustrates the thoroughgoing nature of Avey's materialism, just as her comparative lack of intestinal fortitude establishes the spiritual strength of the people of Carriacou. More importantly, the combination of these literal and figurative discharges frees the space necessary for Avey's encounter with the Excursion.

The degree to which the Excursion becomes an exercise in re-orienting Avey's narrative framework is emphasized by Lebert Joseph's explicit attempts to include Avey in the story of the Carriacou people. Observing Avey's dancing and her height, he concludes that she must belong to the Arada tribe. Although his position is logically suspect, he sees "(and insist[s] that others also see) things about her which could only be of his imagining" (*PSW* 253). Lebert Joseph's insistence on the pre-eminence of his own vision of things, coupled with his indifference to logic and probability establish him as a

true storyteller, one who prefers a compelling fiction over a logical truth. As such, he attempts to make Avey into one of his characters. In this capacity, he is not so different from Kilbannock, and it is important to acknowledge the degree to which Joseph's act conforms to many of the usual strategies of narrative seduction.<sup>35</sup> The important and redemptive difference, of course, is that Joseph's narrative insists on the value of the microcosm, of inner space, while simultaneously rejecting the more public values of the macrocosm.<sup>36</sup> Rather than subjugating his story to the grand narrative, Joseph views the whole world through the story of Carriacou, and flatly rejects the superiority of any other competing narrative. Perhaps more importantly, his effort is not one which seeks to *override* Avey's sense of self; it's one which seeks to help her answer the question of who she is. Lebert Joseph's story, like the music that inspires it, arises from his insistence on the importance of knowing and maintaining self. "Its source [is] the heart, the bruised, still-bleeding innermost chamber of the collective heart" (*PSW* 245). The result of his story is not the by now familiar sort of narrative hijacking, but an intense feeling of connectedness and stability, an intense awareness of the "threads" (*PSW* 249) that hold people together and make them strong. The fact that Avey finally becomes a kind of "Ancient Mariner" (*PSW* 255) illustrates the degree to which the Excursion has alerted her to the importance of individual stories. Far from taking over her life, the

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<sup>35</sup> For example, Joseph's narrative gains its effect by disorienting its subject, and by weakening the individual's ability to resist. These processes seduce the subject into believing in the legitimacy of several dubious assumptions and encourage the subject to act inside a logically vacuous framework.

<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Jay's earlier connection to the story of the Ibos, a story that does not run from his own heritage, suggests that essentialist or genealogical connections are not necessary for successful narrative identification. It is not finally important that Jay is not from Tatem, or that Avey is not from Carriacou, just that they feel and understand the individual and communal value of the stories and that they feel them at an important level.

stories Avey encounters during the excursion give her the story of her life. Or, more correctly, they show her that her story is important and needs to be told.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to expand the investigation of masculine stories into new areas. As I have attempted to show, the idea of America and the idea of fatherhood produce distinct narrative frameworks which seduce their subjects in new and different ways. In both cases, the dominant storylines leave no room for individual identity. Those who wish to satisfy the demands of epic narrative must do so at the expense of their individual spirits; those who refuse face the difficult task of finding spaces outside the influence of grand narrative. These spaces are few.

I have also attempted to make some direct connections between the collapse of the American ideal and some threats to the feminist enterprise. As Marshall's handling of the American experiment might indicate, an idea as big and powerful as "freedom" must be accompanied by some degree of moral and philosophical rigour in order to be productive. When the idea of freedom collapses into a one-lane story devoted only to getting and doing what we want at any price, we cease to be heralds of a new era and begin to duplicate the power-first, morally vacuous strategies that offended us in the first place. Our satisfaction over our ability to do things must be accompanied by serious investigation of the merits of what we are doing. Otherwise, we're left with the empty self-satisfaction of bullies.

The tragedies we find in both *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Praisesong for the Widow* arise directly from the inability of individuals and communities to distinguish between empty and "full" visions of success. The most successful community, the Carriacou people, finds its success in its willingness to resist the seduction of epic, but empty, stories. The least successful community, The Barbadian Homeowners' Association, sacrifices everything but the bottom line, and this scramble to get ahead at any price finally leads them into areas they cannot spiritually afford.

Scarpa suggests that Marshall's characters are "in a safe context as long as they hold onto their culture in order to define their identity" (98). She is largely correct insofar as the smaller culture combats the temptation to be defined by American materialism. The small community in Carriacou, like the community in *Tatem*, uses its own stories as a means of establishing and defending self against the demands of grander narratives. In this most important sense Scarpa is absolutely correct: maintaining small spaces protects the individual from large-scale difficulties. My only problem is, perhaps, a quibble. Scarpa doesn't go small enough. The most productive microcosm is even smaller than a community. For, if defining self by community is a useful mode of resistance, defining self by self must remain the ultimate, if difficult, goal. Holding onto culture is useful insofar as it maintains the space necessary for self. As such, the community should not *define* identity; it should frame it. Lebert Joseph, the most stable and self-aware character in either novel, clearly indicates that the real value of community is not in its tendency to define people, but in its ability to establish the frame in which the individual writes his life. Lebert Joseph knows stories, but he also (and

perhaps more importantly) tells them. The key differentiations inside the Carriacou people demonstrate that their individual identities participate in shaping the community. Thus, rather than a dictatorial definition by community, there is a cooperative definition *of* community. In Marshall's work, safety doesn't come from *yielding* to stable stories, even if they are one's own; it comes from making small, individually important stories and keeping them in small, individually important spaces.

## **Chapter Four**

**J.M. Coetzee: Ontological Indeterminacy, Machismo, and the Fictions  
of Fatherhood**

This chapter, an analysis of the work of J.M. Coetzee, attempts to reconcile or unify a number of the possibly divergent strands of this study. Focusing on *Foe*, and *The Master of Petersburg*, this section acts as an inquiry into the absolute limits of story worlds, a consideration of the stability of masculine signposts, and as a tentative assessment of the merits and limits of politically committed critical discourses.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, it highlights how Coetzee's novels take *ideas* like "story," "masculinity," "centre," and "margin" and subject them to a direct and explicit (rather than an indirect and implied) kind of investigation. These are self-consciously intellectual novels, and ideas loom large inside them; ideas and concepts, rather than emotions and characters, often provide the framework for Coetzee's fictional world(s), and, this being the case, ideas are often more readily available for critical processing than they are in other texts.

Indeed, Coetzee's large critical reputation might well be a testament to his critical topicality as much as to his strictly literary achievement.<sup>2</sup> But, whatever one thinks of Coetzee's self-conscious style, it is clear that his fictional worlds are not established within any conventional set of boundaries. Linda Hutcheon has suggested that Coetzee makes "semantically 'impossible world[s]' of fiction" ("The Politics of Impossible Worlds" 225), that he makes worlds which, in a strictly logical sense, can't meaningfully

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<sup>1</sup> Coetzee's most recent novel, *Disgrace*, also receives some attention, but, as a basically realistic novel, its treatment of narrative worlds is more subdued and indirect than the surreal story worlds the reader finds in *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*. As such, it will generally be considered only insofar as it intersects with, or supplements, some argument about the other two novels.

<sup>2</sup> People who dislike Coetzee's work generally complain about the self-consciousness of its construction and its too-deliberate manipulation of issues, while people who like it tend to appreciate it for its "intensity" or some other "writerly" achievement. This suggests that people form their opinions of Coetzee based on factors which are not so much emotional as they are mental: he either gives a person a headache or he seems to expand his or her mind.



exist. This suggests a kind of direct investigation into the borders between real and imaginary states, an investigation which calls a seemingly paradoxical world into being, one which both exists and which cannot possibly exist. The logical contradictions that trouble the reader at the end of *Foe* are the most obvious examples of this, but efforts to make sense of the nonsensical (or at least contradictory), and to establish the boundary between real and imaginary entities are at the very centre of a lot of Coetzee's work and prove very useful to many of the arguments this study is trying to make. The *metaphoric* invocation of story-worlds in Waugh, Selvon, and Marshall is made explicit in Coetzee, as images, ideas, and ghosts from fictional worlds gain concrete substance and act in clearly defined and recognizable ways in the "real world" of the "narrative proper." Guy *imagines* himself as Sir Roger; Moses *dresses up* for the carnival; Avey *dreams up* her Great Aunt's ghost. In *Foe*, Susan Barton meets her fictional daughter by the side of the road and talks to her. This distinction is important and emphasizes the full degree to which the ontological status of "real" loses its value in the face of certain narrative forces. In Coetzee, fictional characters *literally* rebound into actual existence, and so the existential troubles and imaginary ghosts that *nearly* erase Guy, Moses, Deighton and Jerome become even more immediate, more scary, and more impossible to escape.

As far as the nature of masculinity is concerned, *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg* are preoccupied with paternity and begetting, or, more directly, with the link between begetting offspring and some type of firm, solid existence, some kind of real legitimacy. In his influential book *Manhood in the Making*, David Gilmore views

masculinity as a "mythic confabulation" (226). He says that "manhood is a symbolic script" (230), and identifies an "imperative triad" (222) that establishes "the quasi-global personage" (223) of the Real Man. As indicated in an earlier chapter, this personage is articulated as "Man-the-Impregnator-Protector-Provider" (223). Under Gilmore's construction, "Man-the-Impregnator" is every bit as important as "Man-the-Protector" and "Man-the-Provider," and it is this aspect of the masculine construction that informs most of this chapter. If Waugh's preoccupation with military honour demonstrates the second part of Gilmore's triad, and Marshall's presentation of Deighton and Jay demonstrates the third, Coetzee's novels seem to emphatically emphasize the first.<sup>3</sup> In *Foe*, this takes the form of specific uncertainties about who is "father born" (91), and who gets to "father... offspring" (140). In *The Master of Petersburg*, the step-father Dostoevsky feels like a "faded copy of the son" (67), a situation which might, perhaps, be rectified if he were to "bring about the birth of the saviour [with] a real river of seed" (225). In Coetzee's most recent novel, *Disgrace*, the protagonist is haunted by the distinctions between being "father... foster-father, step-father, [and] shadow father" (6). As a result, he feels both that "being a father is... rather abstract business" (63) and that he has become an outcast "for broadcasting old seed, tired seed, seed that does not quicken" (190). In all of these cases, the familiar masculine confusion between the "abstract business" of images and stories on the one hand, and ultimate realities like birth and death on the other, is played out in terms of the father's relevance to some type

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<sup>3</sup> Selvon's "boys" are, of course, interested in the *act* of procreation but they do not ever express any specific interest in the strictly "creative" aspects of the sex-act. As suggested in Chapter Two, their approach to masculinity creates a kind of fractured hybrid, drawing upon several distinct and different masculine storylines. As such, they do not fit as neatly into Gilmore's framework.

of offspring. Coetzee addresses this dilemma in such a way that the Oedipal cycle (by which the begotten comes back to haunt the begetter) is complicated by the father's desire to be renewed and legitimized through his progeny. For Susan Barton, the effort to be "father of [her] story" (123) is inextricably linked with her need to have "substance" in the world,<sup>4</sup> while, for Dostoevsky, the collapse of his relationship with his stepson Pavel threatens his sense of his own existence. When Nechaev says Dostoevsky is "fourth cousin, fifth cousin to Pavel Alexandrovich, not a father, not even a step father" (119), he initiates a struggle between the two men as each seeks "the words to which Pavel will give his slow smile, his nod of approval" (120).<sup>5</sup> In each case, the desire for, and the absence of, a firm link between father and some progeny is at the root of some fundamental existential anxiety, an anxiety which, like Moses' fear that he will "vanish without a ripple or a blink" (*Moses, Migrating* 18), reflects the correlation between lasting influence and real existence; presence in some kind of offspring affirms one's presence in the world. In Gilmore's terms, "the ultimate test is that of competence in reproduction... manliness means results; it means procreating offspring" (41); "big-balled men... tower over and dominate their less well-endowed and more phlegmatic fellows" (41). For Coetzee's phlegmatic fellows, this is particularly and painfully true. In *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*, the dubious nature the father's position, the contestable nature of his "results" means not only a marginal

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<sup>4</sup> The case for "Susan as father" is made in detail later in the chapter. For now, it is important just to acknowledge the degree to which she self-consciously identifies with the role.

<sup>5</sup> In *Disgrace*, David Lurie, contemplating his daughter's pregnancy, feels a similar sense of helplessness against the realization that, "when he is dead", there will be a long "line of existences in which his share, his gift, will grow inexorably less and less, till it may as well be forgotten" (*Disgrace* 217). This genealogical diminishment is directly tied to his anxieties about his social and material existence, where he must "practise for old age... practise for the old folks' home" (*Disgrace* 86).

social position, but a marginal ontological one, one where s/he may not finally exist at all.

Coetzee's tendency to deal with big issues (like the role of language and stories in human existence, or the role of race, gender and geography in human psychology) has had a direct influence on the critical handling of his work. Coetzee's fiction, because it intersects with some of the Twentieth Century's most inescapable political and intellectual realities, has been approached in terms of what I am calling a discourse-based criticism which seeks to consider works *as totalities* and to align them with one particular critical or political affiliation. In Coetzee's case, this has typically broken down along a fairly obvious (if unfortunate) binary opposition between two views of the writer: as a sophisticated practitioner of political resistance through densely coded allegory, or as a politically uncommitted "writerly writer" preoccupied with the trappings of Western modernism and postmodernism. These critiques generally involve efforts to move, pull, drag, or kidnap Coetzee's elusive and complex works and to situate them squarely in one discourse or another, to view Coetzee, in Gerrit Olivier's terms, as either a "cultural activist" or a "pale aesthete" (as qtd. in Kossew 3).<sup>9</sup> These are, of course, valuable questions. Attacks from the "political left" have "sometimes approached the crudeness and reductiveness of racial thinking" (Huggan/Watson 3),

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<sup>9</sup> Olivier's original article in Afrikaans, "Is jy vir of teen die 'struggle'?" ("Are you for or Against the Struggle") has been notoriously difficult to locate. Kossew's study, supported by the resources of G.K. Hall, makes only indirect reference to it, noting the fact that Duncan Brown and Bruno van Dyk mention it in *Exchanges: South African Writing in Transition*. Such situations are not unusual in Coetzee criticism, where many revealing ideas seem to have been expressed in small South African publications, publications which may have existed for only a brief period and in which academic matters to do with pagination, volume number and date have been largely overlooked. As a result, interlibrary loan systems have had difficulty locating them.

while, at the same time, it might be true that "Coetzee's fiction is a part of the discourse of colonialism itself, avoiding... stark issues with elegant allegory" (Gordimer viii). The proper place of (Western) intellectual sophistication in (African) political struggle is, I think, difficult to discover let alone maintain, and the ongoing debate demonstrates that all forms of thought, however crude and however sophisticated, can bring unexpected and, perhaps counter-directed, results.<sup>7</sup>

I do not have any real or direct insight to shed on these important and complicated issues, although I do intend to deal with the *idea* of discourse as a narrative construct. What I propose instead is a fairly straightforward *textual* analysis of *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg* in terms of their narrative and masculine dimensions. Implicit in this approach is some critique of the discourse-based criticism that precedes this study. Brian MacAskill and Jeanne Colleran have suggested that, in *Foe*, "forms of discourse... necessarily position *and thereby regulate* the position of subjects" (448), but I suspect that the application extends well beyond the confines of Coetzee's novel. As already suggested, critical discourses operate as narrative frameworks which seduce their subjects and, in so doing, regulate the subjects' positions. The result is that many of Coetzee's most sensitive critics fall victim to the type of machinations that plague Susan when she feels compelled to ask, "what kind of being is... so serenely blind to the evidence of her senses?" (*Foe* 76). In my view, the critics overlook the evidence of their senses (the evidence provided by the text) because of an overriding devotion to the

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<sup>7</sup> In *Foe*, Susan, an aspiring author, says "my stories seem always to have more applications than I intend" (*Foe* 81), while Coetzee has commented in interview that "the unintended or not-fully-intended consequences of censorship tend to be more significant than the intended consequences" ("Interview" 108). In both cases, some effort to formalize thought-patterns results in consequences beyond the intentionalities of those who create the pattern.

larger cognitive framework which is the discourse of a certain kind of literary criticism. Coetzee's controversial statement that his "allegiances lie with the discourse of the novels and not the discourse of politics" ("Grubbing" 4) has led to some important examinations of the novels in terms of the *discourse* of the novel, but frequently "discourse" overrides "the novel." Discussions tend to drift toward what *novels* (in general) should be doing, rather than to what these specific novels are doing. The result is the kind of analysis in which Theresa Dovey situates Coetzee in a Lacanian context, while Kwaku Korang demands that "postcolonial reading [be] transformative and liberating" (Korang 193).

The value of these approaches is, I think, undeniable, but this study proposes something different insofar as it contains no extended investigation of Coetzee's position inside a specific critical framework and no real consideration of the books in terms of some wider, intertextual, web.<sup>8</sup> Instead, I wish to address the links between the production and application of story and some important aspects of masculinity. The idea of "Man-the-Impregnator" (Gilmore 223), or "man-the begetter," operates in Coetzee's fiction to demonstrate the complex and conflicted relationship between paternity and some kind of masculine legitimacy. Important to my approach to these matters is the way in which Coetzee's work highlights the slippage between apparently stable concepts like "reality" and "fiction," and "father" and "mother," and, as already suggested, the degree to which he makes the disorientation of his characters more than simply

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<sup>8</sup> That is, I make no serious attempt to link Coetzee's novels with their historical and literary precedents, most notably Defoe, Dostoevsky and Nechaev, and *Robinson Crusoe*, *Roxana*, *Demons*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

metaphoric. While Waugh, Selvon, and Marshall routinely construct chaotic environments, they at least maintain the idea of the environment itself, Guy, Moses, and Deighton are confused by the world they live in, but they always maintain some certainty that life and death are stable markers inside a recognizable (if unsatisfactory) sphere of existence called the world. This is not so in *Foe* or *The Master of Petersburg*, where different ontological levels routinely collapse into and efface one another, and where it is nearly impossible to answer a primary, foundational question like "To what order do I belong?" (*Foe* 133). To borrow from Yeats, Coetzee's characters actually live in a world where "the centre cannot hold," where "the falcon cannot hear the falconer," (210-211) or, more poignantly, where the falconer is no longer certain what a falcon is.

Many critics have seen this thoroughgoing deconstruction of the reader's assumptions as anti-hierarchical insofar as it questions even the most elemental of philosophical principles. The absence of any clear, directive, foundational gesture in Coetzee's work has prompted Ian Glenn to conclude that Coetzee has "attempted to make his works critic-proof" (25), that he has deliberately scuttled the critical process, by refusing to "play fair" according to any of the several existent models.<sup>9</sup> Because "I think therefore I am" has no credence in Coetzee's fictional world, because there is no first principle from which to begin any investigation, all systems of authority crumble into what Foe himself calls "the maze of doubting" (*Foe* 135). This doubt avoids

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<sup>9</sup> Glenn's assumption is, of course, a bit naïve inasmuch as "critic-proofing" a work is virtually synonymous with critical invitation; the enormous body of work on Coetzee that has been generated in a short period of time demonstrates that many critics thrive on ambiguity because it gives them so much to do. In contemporary criticism, the impossibility of closure is akin to a renewable resource: it's an invitation to keep talking, which, as this study indicates, is something we're very much inclined to accept.

tyrannical authoritarianism and produces a "retreat" which Susan Naramore Maher equates with "freedom" (69), and which prompts Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson to consider Coetzee as the writer of South Africa's "elsewhere," an emblem of escape from "the prison that the country's cultural life so often appeared to be" (4). By positing an unstable world, Coetzee might, in fact, be highlighting the contingent nature of past, present, and future power structures. The result is a complete frustration of any and all totalizing gestures and the creation of a kind of parity between the powerful and the powerless. In a world where "all barriers are crumbling at once" (*MP* 190), it is probably possible to achieve a kind of "Carte Blanche" (*MP* 189), a space where anything, most importantly freedom, is possible.

But this liberation is not finally redemptive or satisfactory because the liberated "I" is washed away with the oppressive system. The collapse of ontological hierarchies leads not to freedom and self-fulfillment, but to the nightmarish uncertainty, and the pervasive sense of self-effacement the reader finds in Coetzee's novels. In her already cited and very fine book *Self as Narrative*, Kim L. Worthington recognizes that "the spectre of meaninglessness" (3) haunts a post-modern, deconstructed world where (as Lacan seems to suggest) "self-certainty is an illusory construct" (Worthington 7), and where (as Derrida suggests) "the notion of presence [is] a discredited metaphysical illusion" (Worthington 7). Under this rubric, we all become spectres and illusions in an unmapped world. It is not surprising, then, that ghosts are everywhere in both *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*, and that they frequently seem to trump the demands of more real, more substantial people. Lacking the resources to hold their lives together, to



establish the “depth and continuity” (Worthington 240) of self, many of Coetzee’s characters come to experience life as a kind of endless nightmare characterized by radical and unexpected shifts in cognitive framework such that, inasmuch as they exist at all, they exist “like a bird before a snake, hoping it will not swallow [them]” (*Foe* 134).<sup>10</sup> Thus, the hope for a liberated self collapses into the oppressive sense of alienation, excommunication, confusion and meaninglessness that typifies Coetzee’s tone in each work.

To me, these novels demonstrate a persistent search for stability much more than a search for liberty. As Worthington so perceptively notes, “rules... are necessary to make deviance from the rules both meaningful and intentional” (Worthington 10-11). The idea is not to escape frameworks in general, but to establish workable and productive ones, to have a *stronger* awareness of one’s position and to use that awareness as a means of directing one’s own life. This effort is continually frustrated in both *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*. The pervasive sense of uncertainty leads to a nearly pathological attempt by the protagonists to somehow calibrate their position(s), and to decide where, how, and if they should be moving. Characteristically, all attempts to calibrate position are interrupted by stories which undermine the character’s sense of self to the point at which even such elemental connections as paternity and maternity become impossible to sort out and a debilitating sense of isolation and pointlessness sets

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Watson makes a perceptive connection between Coetzee and ideas expressed in Czeslaw Milosz’s poem, “Ars Poetica”: “the purpose of poetry is to remind us/ how difficult it is to remain just one person./ for our house is open, there are no keys to the doors / and invisible ghosts come in and out at will” (30). In his essay, “Breyten Breytenbach and the Censor,” Coetzee says that “getting to the real self (finding the Mystery I) is a life’s task” (95). Both examples, I think, establish the degree to which it is difficult to establish and maintain a coherent and singular self, one which *does* have the keys to its own doors and which can resist phantoms, or, as I would have it, fictions.

in. Coetzee's characters are involved in a perpetual and "plodding chase across empty country after the rumour of a ghost, the ghost of a rumour" (*MP* 53). The pointless chase takes place because rumours are all that's left when all certainty has gone. Even more devastatingly, rumour, in the form of dubious fictions and narrative frames, is the only organizing principle left. And, of course, such frameworks serve only to further destabilize whatever fragile and vanishing sense of self the individual might still possess.

### ***Foe*: Narrative Craft and the Nature of Authority**

As some critics have noted, *Foe*'s structure is such that it moves steadily from a stable, essentially realist, opening section toward its surrealist final section. This has been read as a critique of patriarchal and colonial literary authority, and, as already suggested, been seen as a method of disrupting certain hegemonic systems of power. This line of argument emphasizes Susan's quest to express the truth of the island in the face of the indifference and/or the machinations of some dominant male voice. In this view, *Foe* is most importantly about what Paula Burnett calls the "criminal distortion" (245) Susan suffers when she "is barred from the domain of authorship by her gender" (Attridge 176). As such, Susan Naramore Maher believes that Cruso "needs [Susan] only as an object of control" (36) and that *Foe* uses her as a subordinate, imaginary trope. In the view of these critics, *Foe* critiques these kinds of authoritative styles by

gradually unravelling the narrative voice, by creating and highlighting the “fictive haze” (Donoghue 54) between the official story and events as they actually occurred.

Insofar as such an interpretation focuses on structure, it is, I think, indisputable. It’s clear that the assured first-person of the first section slides into central sections comprising undelivered letters and unsubstantiated ghosts, before collapsing entirely into the completely undesignated voice of the final section. As such, it does indicate a clear movement away from monolithic power and into a kind of narrative free-for-all where continuity and coherence do not seem to have any particular place.<sup>11</sup> There is, however, a kind of hocus-pocus in the critical move from structure into characterization. The kind of thinking that works for the novel’s structure fails when applied to its primary characters, most notably Susan and Cruso.

I wish to contest both the view that Susan is some kind of truth-seeking marginal figure and the too-rash, too-ready identification of Cruso as colonial bully, and to resituate the discussion in order to emphasize the specifically narrative elements of the relationships between Susan and Cruso, Susan and Foe, and, to a much lesser degree, Foe and Defoe. In establishing these relationships, I hope to connect the successes and failures of Coetzee’s storytellers with the other authors and stories that inform this study. Throughout this project, storytellers have acted, or attempted to act, as creators and/or controllers of various realities. In the *Sword of Honour*, Kilbannock makes real military alliances out of fictional heroic content; in *Moses Ascending*, Moses tries, and fails, to

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<sup>11</sup> I refer to the ways in which the final section posits several different (most notably living and dead) versions and several different positions (the house, the ship, the narrative itself) for the characters without clearly indicating how, or if, one version is more valid than another.

write himself into existence; in *Praisesong for the Widow*, Lebert Joseph uses family lore to stabilize the existence of his otherwise marginal community. In every case, the ability to overcome obstacles and establish functional narrative is closely linked with the character's success and happiness.<sup>12</sup> For the characters in *Foe*, this is particularly and peculiarly so. The obstacles to narrative construction are not just environmental in *Foe*; they're interpersonal as different would-be authors struggle to accumulate and manipulate information toward different narrative purposes. The struggles between Susan and Cruso, and Susan and Foe are, at bottom, to do with who gets to establish and maintain the narrative framework and with who is going to seduce (and/or compel) whom into living inside his or her story world. Obviously, power has something to do with these contests, but, most often, it is *narrative* power or narrative skill that does the real work, the heavy lifting, in these struggles, not any more conventional or stable power-structure to do with gender or politics; the degree to which critical accounts overlook the specific function of story in *Foe*'s central conflicts is, I think, the degree to which they miss the really new and complex aspects of Coetzee's text.

Coetzee's Cruso has been most often read as "the essential colonial, the person with [both] 'narrow horizons' and the conviction that 'he knew all there was to know about the world'" (Roberts 89). This view is based on an assumption that Cruso seeks to dominate and subjugate Friday and Susan, and to claim the island as his individual and private kingdom, a grandiose wish which is, perhaps, reinforced by his desire to take

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<sup>12</sup> These obstacles include, in Kilbannock's case, the fact that Trimmer is in no way heroic, in Moses' case, the legacy of the previous narratives and the presence of "the Party" in his basement, and, in Lebert Joseph's case, the pervasive view that his people and his island are a "waste [of] time" (*Praisesong for the Widow* 77).

their decrepit “encampment” and deem it “his castle” (*Foe* 9), and by the authoritative tone he takes with Susan when he says “You will do as I instruct” (*Foe* 20). These cues do seem to suggest a kind of self-centred wilfulness that might be colonial in origin, but there is very little to suggest that any real oppression takes place on the island. And, if Cruso is the self-designated leader, he is not a particularly demanding or vengeful one. He works just as hard as his “servant,” and he finds “no call to punish Friday” (*Foe* 37); he also provides Susan with shelter and food,<sup>13</sup> and these things are important. The classic colonial figure *believes* he has saved some sorry unfortunates from death and ignominy, but Cruso and Friday *actually* save and provide for Susan, and the degree to which Susan is limited by Cruso is at least matched by what he provides.

And, if this sounds like colonial or neo-colonial thinking, it shouldn't. Susan is the latecomer to the environment, and it is Susan who acts as vocal critic of the established (if not indigenous) practises of the island. Most importantly, the island Cruso seems to colonize is *vacant*, or, at the very least, there is no evidence of any other inhabitants.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the colonizing Cruso is lacking in at least one key area: colonial subjects. Stephen Watson has said that “colonialism, at its very simplest, equals the conquest and subjugation of a territory by an alien people” (“Colonialism” 370), and, if

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<sup>13</sup> I do not wish to overlook the fact that he assumes control of the island, or the fact that he is reluctant to give Susan shoes, but arrogance and pettiness do not, by themselves, constitute colonial occupation. Part of my point is that, as critics, we must be wary of a too ready conflation between unpleasant *personal* characteristics and disturbing political implications. In this book, Cruso is a cantankerous and probably unlikable man, but, if we are interested in fairness and justice, we cannot use personality traits as transparent markers of political orientation.

<sup>14</sup> I am assuming here that Cruso and Friday arrive at approximately the same time, and that Friday is no more native to the island than Cruso. This is, perhaps, a dubious assumption, but one that is required if we are to continue to view Friday as a displaced slave. He cannot be kidnapped by slavers and still be at home. The lack of information about Friday, and its potential advantages and disadvantages, is explored later in the chapter.

this is even remotely so, Cruso fails to meet the simplest, most minimal conditions of colonial presence. This is no mean distinction. The moral foundation of postcolonial thinking resides in the legitimacy of the political, social and cultural practices of the people(s) who pre-date the arrival of the colonists. Without people who pre-date colonial arrival, colonialism is not really an intelligible concept. Sheila Roberts suggests that Cruso lives in "stolen space" (89), but it seems obvious that Cruso (and Friday) do not displace or denigrate the "native" inhabitants; they simply move into an empty space and develop a kind of idiosyncratic framework, a rudimentary culture, in which they live their lives. That this culture should have a kind of power structure is hardly surprising, and even if, as readers, we shudder at the implications of the white master and the black slave, we must remember that hierarchical organization is not the exclusive property of Western cultural systems. Domination and subordination are, and have been, characteristics of many cultures outside the web of colonial influence.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, far from being an oppressor, Coetzee's Cruso (as opposed to Defoe's Crusoe) can be productively viewed as a figure of anti-colonial resistance. The idea that he has "narrow horizons" comes only from Susan who, in classic colonial fashion, thinks only in terms of a world outside the marginal space she occupies. She continually degrades his "indifference to salvation" (*Foe* 14), but her vision of salvation is highly suspect and seems to consist only of escape from the assumed insignificance of the island and return to the colonial centre, to Britain, where "the earth under [her] feet is

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<sup>15</sup> I do not mean to suggest that subjugation is simply a fact of life, or that its universality makes it any more acceptable, just to show that hierarchical organization is not synonymous with colonial occupation. And, even if we dislike these relationships as a matter of principle, we must remember that Friday's subjugation is of such a small degree that it later seems to evoke a kind of nostalgia. In England, he suffers "a terrible fall... from the freedom of the island where he could roam all day" (*Foe* 56).

firm" (*Foe* 26). It is Susan, not Cruso, who wants to "give" Friday "the blessings of civilization and [make] him a better man" (*Foe* 22) and Susan who is quick with critiques of Cruso and Friday's activities; she also assumes an impermeable distinction between herself and the ignorant Patagonians with a confident "I know better" (*Foe* 15). This unfounded assumption of superiority finds its fullest expression when she questions Cruso about why he has "not built a boat and made [his] escape" (*Foe* 13). It is only later, after she has experienced the island herself that she comes to recognize that there is "not a tree that did not grow twisted and bent" and admits that they "might have built a raft... but never a boat" (*Foe* 55). This is quintessentially colonial behaviour inasmuch as her unqualified judgments precede her direct understanding.

In contrast, Cruso seems to have internalized the nature of the island and to be content to live inside the framework it provides. In many ways, his is a model of self-containment and self-reliance that directly refutes the kind of self-reliance through pathological industriousness that typifies Defoe's Crusoe. Rather than forcibly trying to recreate a foreign culture in a new space through an exhausting series of projects, Cruso creates an idiosyncratic environment that responds to both his individual desires and to the material conditions he encounters.<sup>16</sup> He is a character who has achieved a kind of harmony and identity with his environment, one who is not preoccupied with visions beyond his grasp, and who finds a kind of direct fulfillment in his day-to-day activities. If Derek Attridge is correct that Cruso has "lost touch with [his culture's] founding narratives" (175), is that such an irredeemably bad thing? Is the narrative framework he

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<sup>16</sup> This is not to overlook the indispensable contributions of Friday in creating this environment, but, since he never reveals his desires, it is unclear how the encampment might manifest his preferences or wishes.

establishes so inherently regressive? To me, there is nothing particularly offensive in Cruso's refusal to consider anything that "is not a matter of the island" (*Foe* 36); in fact, it demonstrates a real willingness to forego vainglorious and dubious supposition and to participate in the framework of his life as it already exists.

More importantly, Cruso's detachment from epic narrative does not render his life meaningless. Quite the opposite, he acts "as though a voice [speaks] privately inside him" (*Foe* 13), and, whatever one thinks of private language, it is clear that this kind of inward orientation provides the kind of hard-won centeredness that is so desperately needed by the novel's end. Even Susan finally recognizes a kind of "sorry dignity" (*Foe* 33) in the clearing of the stones, a job that Cruso seems to undertake not for any deferred future gain (he admits he cannot clear the whole island, and he has no delusions about ever planting a crop), but as a practise undertaken for its own sake, an activity of, by, and for the island.

From the outset, Susan is incapable of this kind of direct identification, and, I would argue, it is this disinclination for direct, undeferred thought and action that is at the root of her future torment. Far from being a champion of truth, Susan seems preoccupied with the production and consumption of story. She interrupts Cruso's silent musings on the landscape because, to her, "sea and sky remain sea and sky, vacant and tedious" (*Foe* 38). She cannot find anything meaningful in her actual landscape, while, at the same time, she remains obsessed with "readers reared on travellers' tales" (*Foe* 7) and the fact that "the world expects stories from its adventurers" (*Foe* 34). Cruso feels that his walls and terraces "will be more than enough to commemorate his life" (*Foe*



18), but Susan is preoccupied with future people (some kind of audience) who might misinterpret them as “the ruins of a cannibal city from the golden age of the cannibals” (*Foe* 54-5). She is acutely aware that the world wants and expects “better stories” (*Foe* 34) than Cruso seems able, or prepared, to offer, and these early examples demonstrate the degree to which Susan privileges narrative seduction over direct apprehension. She feels certain that “the idea of a Cruso on his island is a better thing than the true Cruso” (*Foe* 35), and shows a clear desire to manufacture a compelling idea by quizzing Cruso and attempting to coax him into narrative participation. Her efforts to re-make Cruso into something more seductive than he is effectively foreshadow, and compromise, her future objections to Foe’s handling of her life. Foe’s problem with Susan’s real life directly parallels Susan’s problem with Cruso. Susan objects to Cruso’s insistence that “his story... begin with his arrival on the island” (*Foe* 34) and she wants to create a wider context, but, once in England, she is outraged by Foe’s effort to downplay the significance of the island by reducing it into a single chapter in a wider narrative frame.

What this means, I think, is that Susan hasn’t been hijacked by narrative conscription so much as she has been outplayed in a game she volunteers to play.<sup>17</sup> It seems obvious that she has no problem with subjecting real people to narrative manipulation; she just wants to be the one doing the manipulating. In the end, she concedes to Foe’s version because she can’t come up with a better one. His skills outrival hers and this has a negative effect on her self-perception, but the discrepancy

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<sup>17</sup> In this sense, her dilemma is more like Moses’ than it is like Guy’s, Deighton’s, or Jay’s. A willing participant in the construction of fictional worlds, Susan is frustrated by her inability to construct good stories as much as she is tormented by her inability to resist them.

arises out of a difference in ability, not intentionality. Susan might be right that "a liveliness is lost in the writing down which must be supplied by art" (*Foe* 40), and she might be right that she has "no art" (*Foe* 40), but this lack of ability does not disguise the fact that she, like Foe, thinks mostly in terms of "the questions any reader of [her] story will ask" (*Foe* 86). Both the established author and the would-be "authoress" are interested in transcending local experience, in tapping into "the horizon... around us that [is] vast and... majestic" (*Foe* 13), rather than into the tedium of "how dull... life [is] in truth" (*Foe* 81).<sup>18</sup>

The primary difference between Foe and Susan lies in the difference between conscription and seduction, between forced and voluntary participation. Susan's failure as an artist, as a storyteller, lies in her inability to seduce her narrative subjects.<sup>19</sup> Making up lies, bearing "false witness" (Burnett 244) does not constitute the making, or the telling, of a story. The effective storyteller must elicit the participation of his or her audience; the subject must *believe* in the story if it is to work. This is the art that Susan lacks. She has several "visions" of one day being saved, and of the invention and application of tools: she readily constructs interpretations of Friday's actions, but she cannot entice anybody to believe in any of them. Cruso and Friday reject the parameters of Susan's narrative framework, and, like so many literary and non-literary thugs, she resorts to bullying when the hope of affirmation disappears. As most of us know, a good

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<sup>18</sup> This indifference for "the truth" is paralleled by Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* who finds "the full truth duller of all" (*MP* 152), and asks "who except the recording angel would care to write the full, dull truth?" (*MP* 152).

<sup>19</sup> This deficiency is, perhaps, paralleled by her lack of sexually seductive power over both Cruso and Friday. Cruso's two sexual encounters with Susan are framed in terms of his incapacitation, while Friday never shows any desire whatsoever. Even in extremes of loneliness and sexual isolation, neither man is enticed by Susan.

story works by disguising the nuts and bolts of its construction, by seducing us into accepting the validity of the world it posits. Bad stories hammer us with suppositions we don't accept: they try to do with vinegar the things they can't do with honey. And, although there's clear merit in Patrick Corcoran's suggestion that Susan "succeeds in eventually subjugating both [Cruso and Friday] to her will" (Corcoran 260), his conclusion that this "victory... is tantamount to a usurping of the role of the protagonists... in their own narrative" (Corcoran 260) is off target because subjugation is the antithesis of seduction and signifies narrative failure. The nature of Susan's victory is achieved in such a clumsy, inelegant fashion that it convinces no one, least of all Cruso and Friday, of its legitimacy. This is Susan's failure as a writer of lives, a failure signified both by Friday's epic struggle not to be "saved" (it takes "strong men to master him"—*Foe* 39), and by the fact that Cruso dies of "the extremest woe" (*Foe* 43) when kidnapped from his home. The reactions of Friday and Cruso demonstrate how completely they have resisted Susan's machinations, while her reactions to Foe's stories demonstrate just how "powerfully seductive" (Maher 39) his stories are.<sup>20</sup>

Foe succeeds because his narrative strategy places heavy emphasis on persuasion. Despite the possibly sinister nature of his project, Foe's demeanour is exceedingly pleasant and patient, and, despite the sense that he is orchestrating Susan's experiences, he always appears relaxed and matter-of-fact about Susan's, and his own, situation. This is his achievement. Critics who vilify Foe as an agent of patriarchal authority and

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<sup>20</sup> The inability to manipulate real lives is, perhaps, re-instituted in Susan's text, which "goes nowhere" and has "no structure, no action, [and] no potent main character" (Naramore Maher 36).

conventional narrative overlook the clear superiority of his craftsmanship.<sup>21</sup> Like his predecessor, Defoe, Foe's "novelistic method [is] geared to the concealment of narrative artifice" (Head 117), and this transparency makes its suppositions tough to contest.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Defoe's preface to *Robinson Crusoe* explicitly states that the book is a "Just history of Facts; neither is their any Appearance of Fiction in it" (1), and this claim to natural truth has, at least partially, propelled the book to its status as "one of the few stories... that have become modern myths" (James 1). Foe's stories work for the same reason Defoe's stories do: because they successfully present themselves as natural facts. Susan's (would be) daughter *actually* appears, and, although Susan wants to fight Foe's version, she finally surrenders to it because she does not know how to construct, or where to direct, her defence of herself.

More to the point, Foe's version of Susan's story *does* sound a lot better than Susan's version. His story, which contains "five parts in all" (Foe 117), is acutely aware of the particulars of narrative construction (as opposed to simply narrative effect), and he sees it in terms of "loss, then quest, then recovery; beginning, then middle, then end" (Foe 117). This makes good narrative sense, and this kind of sense operates differently

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<sup>21</sup> One must wilfully search out instances of patriarchal behaviour in the novel, as there is no clear indication that gender has anything to do with Susan's narrative difficulties. MacAskill and Colleran assume that Susan's "woman's language is the key to her art" (447), but they make no effort to explain *how* her language is specifically feminine or female. Similarly, any suggestion that Foe's story is conventional or conservative must account for the fact that, during the time in which *Foe* takes place, "the novel" is, as yet, an unvented form: it's brand new, and, as Foe's bankruptcy indicates, his grasp of commercial viability is dicey at best.

<sup>22</sup> As Michael Hanne recognizes, good "storytellers are seldom required to make explicit the presuppositions on which their story is based" (10). As a result, "it is much harder to counter a racist story than it is to demonstrate the nastiness and inaccuracy of more direct racist statement" (10).

than political or ethical sense.<sup>23</sup> We might *want* Susan's story to be as good, or better than Foe's, but it's clear that it isn't. Maher complains that Susan's story is "dwarfed" by Foe's, and concludes that "power, force has everything to do with authority" (37). Hutcheon says something similar when she says that Susan's "gender has everything to do with her lack of narrative authority" (218), but it seems clear that Foe's story is just plain better. In *Foe* (as in all the books I have dealt with in this study) narrative efficacy has everything to do with authority. As the novel wears on, Susan's essentially naturalist "theory of fiction" (Corcoran 259) fails. Her faith in the efficacy of "a thousand touches which... seem of no importance" (*Foe* 18) proves unfounded, while Foe's more careful deliberations and selections (along with his even more malleable orientation to the truth) eventually convince Susan herself of their validity. The blunt truth is that Susan kidnaps her characters, while Foe eventually gets voluntary participation out of his. A skilled storyteller, he breaks Susan's resistance through narrative manipulation not brute force.

What I am trying to suggest is that Foe is not a transparent agent of political or physical oppression; he's an embodiment of a certain supposition: that, as Burnett suggests, "the world is all story" (246), or, as Coetzee himself has argued, that "history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other" ("The Novel Today" 4). What too many critics seem to forget, however, is that *agreement*, voluntary assent, is an essential component of the story-world and this distinction differentiates

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<sup>23</sup> Coetzee himself has been challenged for making the seemingly innocuous statement that "making sense of life inside a book is different from making sense of real life" ("Grubbing" 4). Attwell suggests that "many writers, and many more readers, would see [this] assertion of 'difference' as a form of political and ethical evasion" (11).

story from more obvious forms of conscription and/or domination. Foe's machinations penetrate into Susan's life until she agrees to live in his world. Susan and Foe have sex with each other; Friday and Cruso fight her.<sup>24</sup> Foe's authority doesn't lie in his power to enforce complicity from the outside; it's in his ability to enforce it from within, to make Susan herself accept that she lives in the world he envisions.

Living in such a world can have pleasant and unpleasant consequences, real and figurative manifestations. The nature and quality of one's life in a story depends largely upon the quality of the story itself. As I have been trying to suggest throughout this study, "story proper" has no moral dimension; it's simply a powerful force (like, say, nuclear fission) that can be used toward redemptive and apocalyptic purposes. Nadine Gordimer recognizes this in her comments about Coetzee when she says:

The worth of a work of fiction is proven, finally, only when, alone with me, it imposes the rhythm of its thought processes so that I hear its voice, feel its pulse coursing through my life between readings. (xi)

It's also one where readers/subjects seem to "meet and mingle with writers and their creations on the same level of imaginative reality" (Gordimer x). Under such definitions, Foe's work is of the highest order; Foe's work pulses through Susan's life all the time, and she meets, even if she's sometimes reluctant to mingle with, entities from a variety of different imaginary and ontological levels.

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<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the struggles of Cruso and Friday with Susan closely mimic Guy's struggles with the Army inasmuch as all three are involved in hopeless attempts to resist some kind of forced, unconvincing, narrative.

So too, however, Gordimer's construction lends itself toward a demoniacal interpretation, one where the fictive forces occupy and "impose" a certain set of thought processes onto a subject.<sup>25</sup> This occupation threatens to override (or, in other cases, compromise the creation of) the pre-existent self, to efface or erase those aspects (perhaps even those facts) which do not fit inside the narrative framework, and to posit a fictionalized totality, a character who hears different "voices," in place of the earlier self. The threat of erasure is addressed most poignantly in the ongoing debate about substantiality in the novel which is, in effect, an investigation of the distinction between the truth, and the appearance of truth, between reality itself and persuasive narrative encodings of that reality. Early in her correspondence with Foe, Susan makes a seemingly metaphoric gesture when she imagines Foe, as author, waking his "captains and grenadiers [who] must now . . . begin to stir and set about the next day of their lives" (*Foe* 52-3). She notes, without too much alarm, that his "regiments of foot would sink into everlasting sleep were they not roused daily and sent into action" (*Foe* 53). At this point in the novel, Susan retains a sense of stability and certainty, and has some confidence that she and the regiments of foot exist on different ontological planes.<sup>26</sup> But, as she becomes more dependent on Foe, she comes to resemble the fictional characters she once had the authority to describe. This amounts to a "merging of the figurative and literal" levels (Head 124), such that it becomes impossible to distinguish metaphorical from constitutive "writing."

<sup>25</sup> The idea of "story as possession" is, of course, more fully developed in *The Master of Petersburg*, a concept addressed in detail later in this chapter.

<sup>26</sup> Although Susan has already begun to speak of the "substance" (*Foe* 51) she has lost, she retains a belief that her "story gives the truth" (*Foe* 51). As the novel progresses, she loses this certainty about truth altogether, and, with this loss, she loses her certainty in her own existence.

Like the lives of the soldiers in the imaginary regiments, Susan's life is "drearily suspended till [the] writing is done" (*Foe* 63). Towards Foe's house, she begins to feel as we feel toward the home we are born in" (*Foe* 66); that is, she feels that Foe's space is her most natural environment, that she *belongs* in his house, within his framework. Having accepted his terms, Susan finally suffers the fate she once imagined for his other characters; she lapses into endless sleep inasmuch as she is finally erased from the tale of which she is, in some significant fashion, the source.

**Big-Balled Bullies and Phlegmatic Fellows: Machismo, "Artistry," and Narrative Authority in *The Master of Petersburg***

In *The Master of Petersburg* endless sleep has a much more literal component insofar as the novel revolves around the suspicious death of Pavel Isaev, the stepson of Coetzee's fictionalized Dostoevsky.<sup>27</sup> Still, this actual death serves mostly to provide the framework for some more ethereal investigations about the nature and stability of individual personalities relative to the act of writing stories or fictions. In *Master*, narrative maintains an epic and enigmatic force, and, in some ways, the novel is about Dostoevsky's efforts at "conjuring" (*MP* 49) a coherent story of Pavel's life and death out of the soup of his real and imagined experiences. In *Master*, Coetzee recreates a world familiar to the reader of *Foe*. It is a world where "all barriers are crumbling at once" (*MP* 190), where "nothing... is true, nothing is false, nothing is to be trusted, nothing to be dismissed, [where] there is nothing to hold to, nothing to do but fall" (*MP* 235). Caught

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<sup>27</sup> I will not be exploring the links between the historical and the fictional Dostoevsky. The reader should be aware that, unless otherwise noted, I use the name "Dostoevsky" to refer only to the character presented in *The Master of Petersburg*.



up in a "fictive haze," Dostoevsky attempts to sort out, and often to recreate, Pavel's life into some kind of story that will hold together and make sense to him.

He should, it would seem, be well suited for such an activity. Theodore Sarbin views "narrative as an organizing principle for human action" (9), and concludes that "human beings think, perceive, imagine and make choices according to narrative structures" (8). Hutcheon suggests something similar in *The Poetics of Postmodernism* when she views the novel as "a continuation of that ordering, fiction-making process that is part of our normal coming to terms with experience" (89). If these assertions have any merit, then the skilled novelist, Dostoevsky (unlike the amateur Moses) should be the possessor of incredible power and should be capable of clear, decisive action. He should have the kind of godlike ability Anna Sergeyevna affords him when she says "You are an artist, a master . . . It is for you to bring [Pavel] back to life" (*MP* 140). In short, he should have exactly the kind of powers Daniel Foe seems to possess, the power to make and shape the world.

He doesn't, and this difference signals an important departure in Coetzee's orientation toward narrative power. In *Foe*, narrative subjects (Susan, Friday, Cruso) receive the bulk of the attention, while the narrative "master," Foe, appears as an entity complete unto himself. The book is preoccupied with the internal processes of everyone but Foe, who, by and large, seems to be "above the fray." In *The Master of Petersburg*, the dual nature of Dostoevsky's position as author and character is such that the doubts and paranoias of the narrative producer contend with the doubts and paranoias of the narrative subject. Dostoevsky thinks and perceives entirely in narrative structures, but

this does not afford him any kind of omniscience, and, as his debates with both Maximov and Nechaev indicate, he remains entirely susceptible to the manipulations of other, more straightforward, stories and storytellers. More precisely, his desire to "project himself into another breast" (*MP* 196), to have an "imagination [that] seems to have no bounds" (*MP* 76) results in a pervasive self-eradication that leaves him as an empty, and often helpless, vessel.

In many ways, *The Master of Petersburg* is an extended investigation into some points raised briefly near the end of *Foe*. In a rare moment of self-disclosure, Foe says, "In a life of writing books, I have often... been lost in a maze of doubting" (*Foe* 135), and concludes that, through the use of "a marker in the ground" he aspires only to "have something to return to, and not get worse lost than I am" (*Foe* 135-6). This humbling admission significantly modifies the position he has occupied throughout the novel, and eventually results in Susan's revelation that, perhaps, Foe isn't so much an idle and inconsiderate god as he is a tireless and unappreciated labourer. In this new conception, Susan believes that Foe has "laboured all these months to move a rock so heavy no man alive could budge it" (*Foe* 151), that he is a slave of Sisyphean proportions.

This idea, supplemental to most of *Foe's* concerns, forms the foundation of *The Master of Petersburg*. Again and again, the reader sees Dostoevsky "conjuring his son in vain" (*MP* 49). Far from being a detached, authoritarian, authorizing author, he is presented as a character who is "in the grip" of something that is not really under his control. While Foe seems to *select* and *construct* his stories, Dostoevsky seems to be either overtaken or ignored by his. His "gift" for storytelling frequently operates as a

kind of curse, a sickness made explicit by the seizures which possess him at key moments in the novel. Just as the seizures possess him, his narrative propensities result in his being "overtaken by another voice" (Watson 56). When talking to Matryona, he startles himself with "how quickly he has fallen into the rhythms of storytelling" and he feels "like a piston engine, incapable of any other motion" (*MP* 72). Here, Sarbin's perception of narrative (one that sees narrative as the foundation for decisions and action) is replaced by a perception of story as incapacitating, as limiting.

Dostoevsky's characterization is such that the reader feels Dostoevsky is operating outside his own control. He isn't sure why he stays in Petersburg; he doesn't know whom he trusts, whom he loves, or what he should do. He thinks, "I am behaving like a character in a book" (*MP* 27) because books, stories, are the only things he has; he is "incapable of any other motion." All of his life's most poignant moments are reduced to their narrative properties. When he struggles with Nechaev atop the tower, he reacts against "the melodramatic ring" (*MP* 120) of his own words:

The whole scene—two men on a moonlight platform high above the streets struggling against the elements, shouting over the wind denouncing each other—is false and melodramatic. (*MP* 120)

But, even if this is so, he has no "true words" (*MP* 120) to posit in the place of the unsatisfactory "scene." He has no foundational assumptions from which to begin. His effort to communicate sincerely with Anna stumbles on his use of the words "I swear" because she recognizes his spiritual emptiness. She says, "Swear by whom? By what? What do you believe in that you can swear by?" (*MP* 232). He doesn't have an answer

because writing, which is his life, isn't so much self-expression as it is "partial self-effacement" (Head 152). He does not direct the flow of his pen, or his life: instead, he struggles to make sense of the vaguely-apprehended signals that possess and direct him. "To no one has he ever confessed how much time he spends listening for premonitions of [possession], trying to read the signs" (MP 69). But, "the muse," so prevalent in *Foe*, has no positive presence in *The Master of Petersburg*. The seizures, and the stories and voices he hears "are not visitations, far from it: they are nothing—mouthfuls of his life sucked out of him" (MP 69). The struggle for a narrative conception of Petersburg, the process by which he fills "the first empty page" (MP 242), culminates when "he recognizes nothing of himself" (MP 250), when he admits "I have lost my place in my soul" (MP 249).<sup>28</sup> Far from being the "master" of Petersburg, Dostoevsky eventually appears as its victim. Having been "sent to live a Russian life" (MP 238), called (either by himself or something beyond him) "to live in Russia and hear the voices of Russia murmuring within him" (MP 235), he finally hears nothing of himself.<sup>29</sup> "They pay him lots of money for writing books [but] he had to give up his soul in return" (MP 250).

This is essentially a Faustian deal which ends badly (as such deals seem to do): Writer seeks great creative power, receives it, but at too steep a price: confusion and

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<sup>28</sup> In *Disgrace*, something similar happens inasmuch as David's musical composition struggles as long as he maintains conscious control of it. It only starts to work once the imagined characters begin to "demand a music of their own" (183); things get better the "deeper he follows the Contessa into her underworld" (184). In both books, the abdication of self precedes the successful creative endeavour.

<sup>29</sup> Although it is dangerous to place too much emphasis on such connections, there seem to be some obvious parallels between Coetzee and his character, Dostoevsky, insofar as both seem inextricably linked to a culture which they neither applaud nor deny. Coetzee's repatriation to his politically fraught homeland might suggest that he has somehow been called to live a South African life.

suffering result.<sup>30</sup> Because his narrative gifts fail to provide any real transcendence, Dostoevsky becomes embroiled in the by now familiar struggle to establish and maintain the boundaries of his world, to keep his version (and vision) of things intact, to defend his story against the competing "idea-demons" in the novel, Maximov and Nechaev. Just as Susan and Cruso struggle to determine the boundaries of their individual stories, Dostoevsky, Maximov, and Nechaev struggle to re-situate (or re-calibrate) the limits of narrative constructions in order to give meaning to events. Despite their own objections, Maximov and Nechaev are, like Dostoevsky is himself, "ideas going about in the land... as if ideas had arms and legs" (*MP* 44).<sup>31</sup> They have, it seems, made their own pacts with their own gods, and their struggles with Dostoevsky demonstrate at least two things: the degree to which different discourses construct different meanings out of similar, or even the same, events, and the degree to which (as Patrick Corcoran notes of *Foe*) "the person who is free to decide where a narrative begins and ends is in control of the world s/he narrates" (259).<sup>32</sup>

Still, other, more conventionally masculine, figures maintain more control over their stories than Dostoevsky does over his. The conflict between Maximov and

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<sup>30</sup> The notable exception to this interpretation belongs to Dominic Head who borrows from Bakhtinian theory to view Dostoevsky's (semi)automatic writing in positive terms. Through Bakhtin he says that a serious obstacle to good fiction lies in the "author's 'surplus of vision', his or her knowledge about a character's psyche, fate and so on, which make it impossible for author and character to exist on the same plane, or engage in dialogue" (Head 151). By emptying himself out, Dostoevsky avoids this problem and makes it possible, one assumes, to entertain a variety of (Russian) voices at one and the same time, to produce a truly heteroglossic text. Still, the price seems pretty high...

<sup>31</sup> This is to say that Dostoevsky, Maximov and Nechaev are all in the service of, if not imprisoned by, larger concepts or entities: story, the law, and "the people".

<sup>32</sup> As I hope I have already indicated, the ability to narrate is not at all the same thing as the ability to *decide* how narration goes. In different ways Susan and Dostoevsky have the freedom to narrate, but not the freedom to decide where narrative begins and ends. As a result, neither one is in control of the world s/he is narrating.

Dostoevsky, like the conflict between Dostoevsky and Nechaev, is both an investigation of narrative efficacy, and a quintessential masculine struggle for supremacy. It begins because Dostoevsky is not convinced, not persuaded, by the official story of Pavel's death. "He mistrusts... the chain" of events as it has been told to him and is "not yet prepared to accept the train of fatality" (*MP* 8). This disagreement about the plausibility of a certain story leads directly to an extended struggle based around the manipulation and application of a specific text, Pavel's "letters and other papers" (*MP* 29). In Dostoevsky's view, the papers are of a private nature and represent a link with his dead stepson, while Maximov, as representative of the state, wishes to understand them "in a material and investigative sense" (*MP* 37), in relation to the law. Perceptively, Maximov notes that "in today's circumstances it is hard to know what 'of a private nature' means any longer" (*MP* 38). He is, of course, completely correct. The boundary between private and public worlds depends upon the solidity of the private self. Without this distinction, all barriers crumble and the distinction between internal and external presence becomes difficult to pinpoint.

This is specifically played out in terms of Dostoevsky's dubious paternal connection to Pavel. One of Gilmore's "phlegmatic fellows," Dostoevsky is unable to contend with the "big-balled" authoritarianism of Maximov, a man who wields his own authority with patient assurance, and one who specifically questions whether Dostoevsky has any rights to Pavel's papers, given the fact that he is only a step, rather than a real, legitimate, father. Dostoevsky, consciously or otherwise, acknowledges at least part of this deficiency when he feels the need to fabricate a more stable connection to his son in

his dealings with the police. He tries to be Isaev, the boy's "real" father, because he is understandably anxious about his own tenuous connection to the boy in terms of anything that might matter in the "official records" the police so assiduously keep; he feels that being a real father will afford him more negotiating power than he really has. When he has to admit he has been pretending, he tilts the balance of power decisively in Maximov's favour and loses the ability to wield even the small amount of influence he might have had in the first place. This is, of course, the classic masculine dilemma reconfigured: his inability to accept his real position (relative to a particular masculine imperative), coupled with an overdeveloped awareness of a better, but imaginary, version of himself, results in an even more marginal, less satisfying, position.

But, even though he knows he is lying, Dostoevsky's imaginary vision (his fictional world) is so strong that he does not view the impersonation as outright deceit. Characteristically, he thinks it is a legitimate expression of the overlap between various, often indistinguishable, personalities. Dostoevsky knows he is not Isaev, yet he feels his impersonation is not disingenuous because he "brought up Pavel Isaev as [his] own flesh and blood" (*MP* 30), and thus, he feels, he *is* the person Maximov thinks he is, even though he is not the person he says he is. He isn't Isaev, but he feels himself to be Pavel's father and thinks that "in that sense we bear the same name, or ought to" (*MP* 31). This tendency to privilege what "ought to be" over what is, is the result of two distinct impulses: the "Clark Kent" view of masculine selfhood which discounts the unfortunate "compromises and failures [of] daily life" (Schwenger 118) while

simultaneously asserting the primacy of some idealized "real identity" (Schwenger 118), and the narrative preoccupations that keep him thinking like a character in a book.

As I have been trying to suggest throughout this study, the combination of these factors undermines any strong sense of self. At key points in the novel, Dostoevsky "cannot distinguish Pavel from himself" (*MP* 21) and concludes that his identity is "no more and no less than a thought" (*MP* 46); later, when he tries to summon up Pavel's memory "what comes to him inexorably is the form not of Pavel but of the other one, Sergei Nechaev" (*MP* 60). Far from being a brass-balled straight-shooter, Dostoevsky is left with a perception of himself that is so loose, a "possession" so pronounced, that he comes to exist in a world where Isaev is Dostoevsky is Pavel is Nechaev. In such a context, it becomes impossible to clearly differentiate between a clearly bounded self, and the kind of slippage that typifies much of Coetzee's work.

Because of Dostoevsky's sense of slippage, he is, in the end, at the mercy of Maximov. An old-style patriarch operating under a framework that guarantees his authority and power, Maximov frequently reduces Dostoevsky's concerns to "idle talk [because] in the end it is the law that disposes" (*MP* 39). With these dismissals, he firmly establishes the legitimacy of his own power, while highlighting the functional illegitimacy of Dostoevsky's emotional connection to his stepson.<sup>33</sup> Dostoevsky's attempts to situate Pavel's letters inside the framework of his emotional relationship with the dead boy are continually frustrated by Maximov, who places them in the much more clearly-defined (and publicly recognized) realm of the laws of the state. Unlike the

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<sup>33</sup> This is, of course, a quintessentially masculine desire to denigrate the strictly emotional while, at the same time, appealing to some publicly recognized and sanctioned system to solidify individual authority.



waffling Dostoevsky, the confident Maximov is able to maintain the distinction between private and public self and, with this sense of certainty, he is able to operate efficiently. He is not crippled by the distinction between his "opinion as a private individual" (*MP* 36), and his duties as a public official, while Dostoevsky (here the would-be champion of privacy and individuality) cannot provide a convincing defence against public conscription. When asked, "is a story a private matter?" (*MP* 39), Dostoevsky responds in an understandably (and characteristically) schizophrenic way. In his view, a story is both (or can be both) "an utterly private matter" and something to be "given to the world" (*MP* 40). The ambivalence, or rather the ambiguity, that arises about privacy is a direct consequence of Dostoevsky's unsteady sense of private space. The "utterly private" leaks into "the world" because the unsteady self can't hold anything in or maintain any real boundaries.

It is not surprising then that, although Dostoevsky is outraged over Maximov's attempt to take "a fantasy written in the privacy of [Pavel's] room" and "construe [it] as evidence" (*MP* 42), he violates the privacy he advocates when he "wants to correct the cliché" (*MP* 40) he finds in Pavel's story. He does not allow the "private matter" of Pavel's writing to remain private, and instead mimics Maximov by using Pavel's text for his own purposes.<sup>34</sup> Like Maximov, he has an inclination to "read things not meant for [his] eyes" (*MP* 220), a tendency made manifest when he reads, then writes in, Pavel's private diary. As with the vampiric kiss Foe gives to Susan, there is a strong suggestion that Dostoevsky will (as Margaret Scanlon suggests) "grow stronger at [Pavel's]

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<sup>34</sup> This is re-emphasized, by Dostoevsky's inability to let Pavel "have his death to himself," and instead to turn the death "into the occasion of his father's reformation" (*MP* 81).

expense" (474), that his life experiences, his loves and hates, are a means of "'gathering copy,' the raw material" ("The Writer and the Devil" 50) for his fictional projects. Indeed, the novel's final pages are weighted with Dostoevsky's various admissions that he must "sell all those I love" (*MP* 222) in order to write. As I have already suggested, this is a kind of Faustian bargain that leaves him with "not so much a life as a price" (*MP* 222) to pay.

The ramifications of this bargain are appropriately ambiguous. His tendency to "spy" on lives is alternately associated "with a refusal to accept limits to what he is permitted to know, with the reading of forbidden books" and, at other times with a "spirit of petty evil" (*MP* 71). These divergent interpretations are, of course, bound up with the divergent applications of story, of narrative. Dostoevsky's passionately expressed theory of reading houses both of the elements outlined above. His critique of Maximov's style of reading rests on the fact that Maximov constructs "a barrier" (*MP* 46) between himself and the text "as though the words might leap out from the page and strangle [him]" (*MP* 46). Dostoevsky objects to such barriers and insists that "reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance" (*MP* 47). These articulations all gravitate toward the advantages of refusing to accept limits, toward the open-minded exploration of new and unknown ideas, even worlds.

This said, Maximov's rebuttal is equally, if not more, persuasive; it emphasizes the fact that Dostoevsky's style of reading is also a kind of "demon-possession" (*MP* 47), that "giving yourself up" is also a kind of giving yourself *over* to more potent and powerful forces over which you might have no control. This is an undeniably

unmasculine surrender, and one which provokes the contempt of both Maximov and Nechaev.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, such weakness suggests negative consequences inasmuch as the “forces beyond one’s control” include the spirits of pettiness and evil to which Dostoevsky yields at different points in the novel. In effect, Dostoevsky is swallowed by stories. His refusal to accept limits includes the limits of the singular self and brings with it a kind of self-dissolution, a situation where he “becomes the medium for another voice, the good or evil of which he cannot determine, let alone foretell” (“The Writer as Devil” 53).

His conflict with Nechaev, like his conflict with Maximov, is bound up with the limitations, applications, and interpretations of narratives, and with the question of masculine ambivalence, with whether “beneath the blatant *machismo* one finds considerable ambivalence” (Schwenger 14) in overly assertive men. In the contest for narrative supremacy, Nechaev offers an alternate story of Pavel’s death which Dostoevsky “can’t ignore” (*MP* 60). Tellingly, Nechaev calls Maximov’s version of events “a fiction put out by the police” (*MP* 102) and offers to take Dostoevsky “to the very place” where Pavel died, in order to “open his eyes” (*MP* 105). This would seem to imply that Nechaev has some type of evidence which will convince Dostoevsky, but, in a world with so few limits and such porous boundaries, this does not prove to be the case. Nechaev, a man who “despises ideas” (*MP* 44), mocks Dostoevsky’s desire for telling details and instead forces him “to combat...story in its totality” (Hanne 10). Nechaev

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<sup>35</sup> Of course, I am not suggesting that giving over to narrative is really unmasculine; a primary thrust of this study has been to show exactly how masculine imperatives can be derived from narrative constructions. I just wish to note how apparently unconflicted, stereotypically “macho” characters view this surrender as undignified and effeminate.

presents his version as complete and irrefutable without appealing to evidence. More directly, he admits that the evidence he provides "is not proof" (*MP* 121), while simultaneously saying "I have brought you here so that you can see for yourself" (*MP* 121).<sup>36</sup>

This type of assertion typifies Nechaev's argumentative and narrative strategy, and reveals the degree to which he has constructed himself as a big-balled, epic masculine figure, one who accomplishes his goals by "merely being what he is" (Schwenger 118).<sup>37</sup> He is consistently explained in terms of epic figures (gods, martyrs), thinks of himself as the one to get history started again (188), and shows the familiar fear of self-disclosure when, describing his relationship with the dead Pavel, he says "friendship is effeminate. We don't need friendship" (100).<sup>38</sup> Described by Dostoevsky as "an egoist" (*MP* 196), Nechaev refuses to acknowledge any contradiction in his statements, and instead relies entirely on the persuasive power of his own self-certainty, a certainty the self-dissolved Dostoevsky cannot hope to match. And, despite the crudeness (or even the absence) of Nechaev's logic, Dostoevsky is unable to score any

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<sup>36</sup> In this argument, Nechaev refuses nickel and dime details and pins Dostoevsky into a binary corner where he must either wholly accept Nechaev's story ("I will take you to the very place and I will open your eyes for you." – *MP* 105) or else accept Maximov's. Whatever his decision, it seems Dostoevsky has only two options, both of which are unsatisfactory. In either case he must position himself, or, more importantly, position Pavel's death, inside the narrative framework of an author he does not trust.

<sup>37</sup> At the same time, of course, Coetzee suggests that Nechaev's hypermasculine, heartless ethos might have something to do with some underlying insecurities about his masculine legitimacy. Dostoevsky's original impression of Nechaev describes "a man who could not have a natural connection with a woman" and the writer wonders "whether that [shortcoming] might not underlie his manifold resentments" (*MP* 114). This odd intermingling of apparent certainty and disguised doubt is not pursued outside Dostoevsky's musings, but its suggestion fits nicely into a number of frameworks about masculine behaviour inasmuch as it reveals the degree to which preoccupations with control, power, and action might arise out of some sense of powerlessness and inadequacy.

<sup>38</sup> Even Nechaev's cross-dressing is presented with a kind of machismo, as evidence that he is prepared to do anything to achieve his goals.

decisive victory in their debates because he is so much more pliable than his opponent. As Head astutely notes, Nechaev's "reductive lucidity [is] enticing where the alternative is a complexity which gives rise to barren irreducibility" (Head 146-7). The clear suggestion is that Nechaev's singular, egoistic, unemotional demon is of a different variety than Dostoevsky's voices. It gives Nechaev the foundation for action, if not the framework for complex thought. In Nechaev's vision of the world, doubt, like friendship, is undignified, unproductive and effeminate. It's something to be avoided; "we don't endlessly think *on the one hand* and *on the other hand*, we just do" (MP 104). And, this kind of underconsidered, unreflected *doing* (in the absence of thinking or feeling) promises an age of straightforward and dangerous expression, an age when "the days of cleverness are numbered" (MP 104).

And, if Dostoevsky's defence is any indication, it is Nechaev's vision of the world that will win out. Nechaev's wilfulness overrides Dostoevsky's intellect and, if we accept Said's assertion that "texts are worldly, [that] to some degree they are events" (*The World* 4), then Nechaev is the more persuasive author because his texts have the greatest impact in the world. His narrative bullying works in ways that Susan's didn't; he gets to the point where Dostoevsky "no longer knows where the mastery lies—whether he is playing with Nechaev or Nechaev with him" (MP 190). In the end, Dostoevsky is stuck in a situation where "he does not believe himself [, where] everything is collapsing" (MP 102) and this collapse is the direct result of both his theory of reading and story, and some inability to establish a workable and recognizable inner space. Nechaev, despite his other deficiencies, is without self-doubt and this gives him

the capacity to act decisively.<sup>39</sup> He is a different kind of author, one organized around positive (as opposed to negative) capability, one for whom self-assertion, not self-suspension, is the root of his craft. Crudely, he is a writer of the Hemmingway/Carver variety (not of the Ondaatje/Coetzee school) right down to the no-nonsense, minimalist, "what can't be said in one page isn't worth saying" (*MP* 199) style, and he shares the belief that this kind of approach is harder, more masculine, more virile, and flat-out better than any ambiguous polyphony could ever be.

Indeed, Nechaev's narrative success is a fairly explicit critique of Coetzee's own project inasmuch as Coetzee's work generally seems to suggest that "monologism is antipathetic to the writer's objectives" (Head 158).<sup>40</sup> If Head is even remotely correct when he says that "Dostoevsky retains the writer's vision, the ability to present an oblique counter to the monolithic idea-demon" (Head 147), then the writer's position is a dubious one indeed. If Dostoevsky is positing a successful counter, it's so oblique that even he doesn't get it, and he isn't convinced himself.

Dostoevsky's uncertain suspicion that anything might be possible leaves him with an apprehension that "the truth may be more than a hand-press can cope with" (*MP* 198), while Nechaev's machismo views writing primarily as a means toward inciting a riot which is, in his eyes, a much more meaningful and powerful articulation. In the end, the raw power of Nechaev's assertions is more than the spiritually-gutted Dostoevsky can

<sup>39</sup> Nechaev's self-reliance is, of course, in direct opposition Moses' constant self-doubt. More convinced of his own importance, his own epic status, Nechaev simply does not ask a lot if the questions that debilitate Moses.

<sup>40</sup> Head draws the above conclusion from Coetzee's expressed belief that serious writing is "a matter of awakening the countervoxes in oneself" (*Doubling the Point* 65), that multiple voices in dialogue with each other make writing good.

hope to cope with. Indeed, Dostoevsky's heteroglossic approach can almost appear as a kind of colonial occupation. Consider Bakhtin's statement (cited by Coetzee in the essay on Breyten Breytenbach) about the successful writer's project in which:

One has no access to one's own personal 'ultimate' word [so that] every thought, feeling, experience must be refracted through the medium of someone else's discourse, someone else's style, someone else's manner, with which it cannot immediately be merged without reservation, without distance, without refraction. (202)

Dostoevsky is so successful at courting this kind of aesthetic, this kind of life in stories, that he has "no access" to himself, and, as a result, he can't defend himself. In the final analysis, "the mastery" lies with Nechaev, and Dostoevsky helplessly bends to his will. The ego-driven, macho storymaker defeats the heteroglossic story-vessel. "At every turn, [Dostoevsky] feels, he has been outplayed... outplayed by a player who... recognized the pleasure he took in yielding – in being plotted against, ensnared, seduced" (*MP* 206). This voluntary yielding, this seduction is, of course, aligned both with a conventionally feminine kind of weakness, and with some more general aspects of the narrative subject who, unable to resist, accepts, and lives inside, the world posited by some persuasive narrative. Too late, Dostoevsky realizes that "he has been the quarry all the time" (*MP* 203), that he has been *inside* Nechaev's plot all along, that he has lost and Nechaev has won. The riots of the next day testify to the efficacy of Nechaev's narrative strategies.

### **Making the Heavens Tremble: "God the Father," Filial Submission and the Quest for Narrative Authority**

Implicit in all of this talk of Faustian pacts and demonic possession is the desire for omniscience, for divinity, for some place beside God the Father. Stephen Watson rightly notes that there is a strong "religious element" in Coetzee's work that is evidenced in "its obsession with evil, its repeated attitudes of invocation, supplication, confession, even in the consistent tone of mourning" ("The Writer and the Devil" 58).<sup>41</sup> He also uses Gadamer's comments on Greek Tragedy to frame his argument: "What man has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but a knowledge of the absoluteness of the barrier that separates him from the divine" (as qtd. in Watson 59).<sup>42</sup> In *The Master of Petersburg* the obsession with divinity is played out in narrative terms such that "the absoluteness of the barrier" between God and demons like Dostoevsky and Nechaev is perpetually being questioned. This results in a situation where God the Father is frequently challenged and questioned by "his children" in a kind of Oedipal struggle for recognition and/or supremacy. Repeatedly, they seek to bait and tempt God, to make Him reveal Himself, and, in so doing, establish a position in some kind of cosmic order. Like Susan before them, each "author" attempts to configure his "story as it should be

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<sup>41</sup> Watson uses this argument to demonstrate that Coetzee's characters "consider themselves to be *souls*" (Watson 59), that, however pressing political problems might be, their spiritual needs are of a degree that "no amount of social engineering can hope to change" (Watson 61), that their search for redemption extends far beyond their material circumstances.

<sup>42</sup> Watson does not provide any type of direct citation, but something similar appears in *Truth and Method*, where Gadamer writes that, in tragedy, the "spectator recognizes himself and his own finiteness in the face of the power of fate. . . . Tragic pensiveness does not affirm the tragic course of events as such, but rather a metaphysical order of being that is true for all" (132).



seen in God's great scheme of things" (*Foe* 126) in an attempt to discover, or make, *the* grand narrative, the overriding unperceived story that results because "God continually writes the world, the world and all that is in it" (*Foe* 143).

Early in *The Master of Petersburg*, Dostoevsky poses a telling rhetorical question when he asks, "Must multitudes perish before the heavens will tremble?" (*MP* 9). The question resonates deeply throughout the remainder of the novel because it explicitly addresses the relationship between earthly multitudes and the processes of the heavens. The earth and the heavens represent distinct narrative frameworks, and Dostoevsky questions how and where the two frameworks intersect with each other. Crudely, he asks, "How many human lives before the heavens will take notice?" More subtly, he wonders what it takes to make the cosmic plan reveal itself, how human beings are to calibrate their individual smallness in the face of God's plan, which, as far as he can tell, is following an "indifferent course" (*MP* 9). Such revelation would, of course, amount to omniscience, and such omniscience would make Dostoevsky himself a kind of God.

The familiar struggles to determine the limits and applications of story and to delineate between "character" and "author" are thus extended to the widest possible constituency, and questions arise as to whether God (the Begetter of All) can be seduced into revealing himself through the narrative manipulations of his children. Dostoevsky explores these ideas by creating and pursuing "scenes" where God acts as a kind of character. He explains Pavel's death to Matryona in the following fashion:

No one kills himself...You can put yourself in danger but you cannot actually kill yourself. It is more likely that Pavel put himself at risk to see

whether God loved him enough to save him. He asked God a question — will you save me? — and God gave him an answer. God said: No. God said: Die. (MP 75)

From this scene, he derives several possible morals including the telling conclusion that “God does not like to be tempted... [that] the principle that he should not be tempted is more important to him than the life of one child. (MP 75). What this amounts to is God’s resistance. His refusal to play the role Pavel asks Him to play, His refusal to operate under any framework but His own.

Ever hesitant and unsure, Dostoevsky makes no direct challenge to God’s authority and instead attempts to calibrate his existence through indirect and confusing theological investigations. Afraid of blasphemy but seeking guidance, Dostoevsky enters a familiar maze in which he attempts to discover God’s plan without tempting Him, and, as a result, he gets stuck in a bind between different impulses in his consciousness, between wanting what he *really* wants (which is a blasphemous sort of power) and accepting what is available to him (which leaves him lost and confused).<sup>43</sup> His belief in scripture leads him to believe that he must raise up “*the least thing*” (MP 82) and exalt it if he is not to miss his salvation, which will come like a “thief in the night” (MP 84). But, even within these strictly Biblical parameters, Dostoevsky becomes confused because he cannot find an appropriate application for the parable. The cosmic

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<sup>43</sup> This double-bind is not unlike the one that troubles Guy relative to his military commands (He can’t be a hero if he follows the dictates of “bumf”, but he can’t be in the army unless he follows orders.) or the one that troubles Moses relative to his memoirs (He can’t be a great writer if he’s too derivative, but he is reluctant to be too original, lest such a project should fail.). In every case, some narrative network shortcircuits some important desire.

perspective gets muddled in the practical context, and his effort to save the wailing dog, the least thing, stumbles:

From the third floor it had seemed easy to find the dog. But when he reaches street level he is confused. Does the crying come from left or from right, from one of the buildings across the street or from behind the buildings? And which building? And what of the cries themselves, which now seem to be not only shorter and lower but of a different timbre altogether – almost not the same cries, in fact? (*MP* 80)

This is a kind of extended metaphor for Dostoevsky's position in the novel as a whole, and a commentary on the distinction between the human and the divine. From a removed and exalted perspective (the third floor), directives seem to be very clear, and the relative positions (and sounds) of things are stable and discernible. But, at "street level," confusion reins. The disparity between the two perspectives, the cosmic and the corporeal, between the all-knowing father and the weak-kneed son, is enough to make things "almost not the same," to make it impossible to navigate the street from the perspective of the third floor window.

Dostoevsky believes that God has a plan and that God can see it, but he does not know how he, Dostoevsky, is supposed to behave inside a framework he cannot see.<sup>44</sup> He wonders whether "every beggar must be treated as a prodigal son" (*MP* 84) to ensure salvation, but feels such behaviour is an attempt to catch God in a bind, to buy every

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<sup>44</sup> He is similarly mortified when he reads his commonplace, petty, final letter to Pavel because Pavel's death changes the (narrative) context so entirely. He asks "how is one to know, which day will be the last?" (*MP* 33).

lottery ticket and still claim to have won. "Without the risk...what is left that is divine?" (MP 85). In Dostoevsky's view, a gesture of faith cannot be a sure thing and the effort to make it so is, almost by definition, disingenuous. It's a conscious attempt to pre-empt God's plan. To treat every beggar as the prodigal son is to treat the beggar not as himself, but as a marker toward one's own salvation; it is an attempt to operate as if one is on the third floor when one is, in fact, on the street. Yet, to ignore God's plan, to overlook the lessons of the scriptures is just a different kind of blasphemy. This is the "paradox within paradox" (MP 80):

He is waiting for a sign, and he is betting... that the dog is not the sign, is not a sign at all, is just a dog among many dogs howling in the night. But he knows too that as long as he tries to distinguish things that are things from things that are signs he will not be saved. That is the logic by which he will be defeated. (MP 83)

Or, put another way, "as long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come" (MP 80).

There does not seem to be any way out of this labyrinth, and Dostoevsky's self-surrender through automatic, even demonic, writing, is, at least partially, predicated by his inability to contend with the paradox of being immersed in God's plan without the ability to investigate, contest or provoke it. As has already been suggested, Dostoevsky's inability to contend with the overriding power of some narrative force (or entity) is not unlike Guy's problem with military headquarters, Moses' problem with London, and Deighton's problem with New York. In every case, mysterious and confusing signals

from some awesome and specifically masculine presence disrupt the character's ability to act in productive and meaningful ways. In every case, a debilitating kind of supplication or self-doubt sets in. In the end, Dostoevsky's fictional project is much like Moses' inasmuch as it reflects not his own beliefs and opinions, but rather the preoccupations of the various ghosts that haunt him. When he begins to write, a "figure" arrives and Dostoevsky "loosens his grip and begins to fall" (*MP* 241) into another dimension, a fall that is inextricably linked with his meditations on the nature of God's presence and voice in the world. His writing, like his dilemma about the thief in the night

is the story of his gambling in another guise. He gambles because God does not speak. He gambles to make God speak. But to make God speak in the turn of a card is blasphemy. Only when God is silent does God speak. When God seems to speak God does not speak. (*MP* 237)

The writing and the gambling are, it seems, self-cancelling assertions, paradoxes within paradoxes. Dostoevsky's literary process of self-dissolution begins almost immediately after this final investigation and, I think, arises directly out of the agony of living in a framework which is at once all-encompassing and impossible to detect. Like the archetypal absent father, Dostoevsky's God is both theoretically "in charge" and functionally difficult to locate. He is the type of father who is, as Max Andréoli suggests in "Heredity and Paternity," "a profound mystery, the more irritating for being both incomprehensible and banal, prodigious and unexceptional" (15). (Such a description could, of course, be fruitfully applied to the concept of "masculinity" in general.) In Dostoevsky's particular case, the inability to contend with his paradoxical position results

in his (conscious or unconscious) scuttling of himself. He arrives at a point where "nothing is private any more" (*MP* 241) because, as I've already suggested, there is no self to hold anything together.<sup>45</sup> This is, I guess, the dubious "freedom of the abyss," an escape from the anxiety of positioning oneself through the elimination of the self as a marker.

Characteristically, Nechaev's big-balled approach to God's narrative is more straightforward and ambitious. Because Dostoevsky acknowledges his own inferiority to God, he is paralysed by doubt, and preoccupied with the nature of sacrilege and blasphemy. Nechaev, acknowledging only himself, refuses to supplicate his story, his vision, to God's. When Dostoevsky says, "You want to steal Easter from Jesus" (*MP* 187), he is not far off the mark. Nechaev refuses to observe the hierarchy of being that haunts Dostoevsky, and the younger man's ambition to establish "Year One. Carte Blanche" (*MP* 189) is a fairly explicit indication of his desire to reorganize history and time to reflect his significance, or, at the very least, the values of his movement. When Dostoevsky asks how God will react to such displacement, Nechaev is unfazed:

God will be envious... We will go to God and stand before his throne and call him off. And he will come! He will have no choice, he will have to listen. Then we will all be together on the same footing at last" (*MP* 190).

Here, Nechaev avoids Dostoevsky's kind of anxiety through straightforward (if naive) self-assertion. By claiming the *a priori* ability to scuttle God's plan and replace it with "the people's" approach, he absolves himself from having to investigate his place in a

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<sup>45</sup> The absence of any private dimension is also, of course, linked with the more general absence of "inner space" as a masculine characteristic discussed in previous chapters.

large and irreducible framework. Avoiding any consideration of inner or cosmic space, Nechaev places everything on the same practical level. The great levelling he imagines puts everyone and everything “on the same footing” and makes the whole idea of a cosmic scheme moot. In Nechaev’s view, the whole idea of a complicated, eternal plan is part of “the old way of thinking” (*MP* 189) that he rejects. In his world-view, people do not want to “have to read a fat book” (*MP* 199), much less abuse themselves with an eternal book they can’t even find or read. “The people act” (*MP* 200), and they are not “interested in fine points of authorship” (*MP* 200). Nechaev solves the complications of God’s plan by waging war on complexity. He says “the days of cleverness are numbered” (*MP* 102), and wonders (along with his Finnish companion) “whether clever books and that kind of thing are going to be allowed” (*MP* 102) in the thoroughly levelled world he imagines.

#### **Father as Fiction: Paternal Anxiety, Public Visibility and Masculine Marginality**

The search for signs of God’s plan and the alternative effort to override it are, in a fairly obvious sense, efforts toward some more stable orientation inside an enormous narrative frame: the story of the universe as told by God. This search is, it seems, eternal and the conflicts irresolvable in a way that closely mimics the conflicts and contradictions associated with living inside traditional masculine narratives. Dostoevsky evades the problem through self-dissolution, while Nechaev escapes only insofar as he destroys (or at least imagines he destroys) the story itself. Neither one finds any

workable place inside the grand narrative and neither one finds any evidence of God's presence in his life. The pervading senses of either emptiness (as in Dostoevsky) or nihilism (as in Nechaev) arise directly from this sense of excommunication from meaning, the sense of separation between the corporeal self and its spiritual source.<sup>46</sup> If there is a God, His face has been erased from the world He engendered; an unhinged kind of nightmare world results.

This large-scale search for evidence of God (exclusively presented in the masculine terms of God the Father) is, I think, importantly related to some of Coetzee's idiosyncratic, if more worldly, investigations into the nature of paternity. In both *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*, "the old matter of fathers and sons" (MP 45) and the matter of fathers and mothers extend into a number of complicated areas. In particular, the idea of paternity is subjected to a number of mutations such that "father" ceases to operate in the conventional honorific sense and instead denotes a kind of emptiness or absence. Rather than operating as an authoritarian force, the father becomes dubious, and even disposable, source-material, someone with only a tenuous and imaginary connection to his issue.<sup>47</sup> Just as God the Father has been erased (or chosen to absent Himself) from the world He created, Coetzee's corporeal fathers are (or at least fear being) displaced by mothers and

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<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Dostoevsky unwittingly satisfies most of the condition Nechaev outlines for a true revolutionary: "He has no interests, no feelings, no attachments, not even a name.... In the depths of his being he has cut all links with the civil order, with law and morality." (MP 60-61). What this means, I think, is that Nechaev and Dostoevsky suffer from a similar sense of disconnection even though the manifestations (paralysis and disintegration for Dostoevsky, paranoia and manic self-assertion for Nechaev) are inverted.

<sup>47</sup> The ambiguous nature of fatherhood is demonstrated near the end of *The Master of Petersburg* when Dostoevsky asks two contradictory questions in direct sequence. First he thinks, "Is this what he must father, give blood to, flesh, life?" then, "Is the thing before him the one that does the fathering?" (MP 240-1). This confusion is also, I suspect, at the root of Spivak's comments about "the abyssality of father" (her italics 165) in *Foe*, although her disinclination for "closure" leads her to think that "we cannot know" (162) with any certainty what Coetzee is doing with the idea of paternity.



sons. The search for evidence of the father in the son is one that continually questions and undermines the relevance and potency of the source, the seed, while simultaneously asserting the primacy of both the nurturing presence, the mother, and the second generation subject, the child.

In her study, "Fathers as Mothers: the Myth of Male Parthenogenesis," Lynn Thomas considers mythic representations of male maternity and wonders if "the image of father as mother [can] tell us anything significant about the nature of fatherhood" (205).<sup>48</sup> It can, it seems, and what it tells us has a great deal to do with the familiar masculine preoccupations with "approbation and admiration in the judgmental eyes of others" (Gilmore 37).

All of the myths display an obvious and underlying concern about the role of the male in the process of reproduction and show some attempt to resolve the insecurities this raises when confronted with the far more evident role of the female. (Thomas 205)

In Thomas' view, mythic representations of the father as mother arise out of a male desire for greater recognition in the reproductive process, a desire for a publicly accepted and verifiable place in an important social and cultural event. The degree to which paternity fails to fit inside the world of "visible, concrete accomplishments" (Gilmore 36) is the degree to which it becomes a source of masculine worry and doubt. In Coetzee's work, the "abstract business" (*Disgrace* 63) of fatherhood is a source of great anxiety, and

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas' study distinguishes between two distinct forms of male maternity: "first, and most radically, a complete process of physical birth from a male body involving parturition and some period of gestation, such as is found in the Greek myths of Zeus giving birth to Athene and Dionysius... and secondly, birth generated from semen alone without recourse to the female womb, such as found in the Greek myth of the birth of Erichthonius" (204).

fathers (literal and metaphoric) worry because “all a man can do is sow the seed; after that it has a life of its own” (*MP* 188). This “life of its own” is, it seems, outside the father’s influence, and under the influence of some more powerful, publicly verifiable mother.

The contingent nature of the father’s (or the Father’s) presence destabilizes some traditional power-structures relative to male and female, and masculine and feminine, roles.<sup>49</sup> DNA tests aside, fatherhood is a story that must be accepted on faith. The fact of pregnancy makes the mother’s connection to the child pretty much undeniable, but, as the talk-shows remind us, fathers can and do disappear. They can disappear because their connection to the child is usually considered not so much in terms of biological necessity, as by some set of more nebulous probabilities, probabilities that can be highlighted or obscured toward different ends.<sup>50</sup> The physical act of procreation is (or can be) overwhelmed by the (narrative and other) processes that follow it, such that the father can become little more than a necessary fiction, a half-remembered story, an *assumed* rather than experienced entity who has no connection to, or impact upon, daily life.

This kind of slippage, whereby the father is a marginal figure, makes it difficult to sort out the relative values of a number of key concepts. In both *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg* words like “mother,” “father,” “child,” “man” and “woman” are conflated in

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<sup>49</sup> Indeed, God the Father often seems to behave like some of the fathers Leonard Benson studies in *Fatherhood: A Sociological Perspective*. They all seem to be alternately “weak and passive” (i.e. absent) or to “retain authority in an arbitrary and cantankerous way” (Benson 94), through seemingly unprovoked punishments.

<sup>50</sup> I don’t mean to make this unnecessarily seedy, just to acknowledge the kinds of debates that can develop about paternity that are not possible in the same way for maternity. The commonplace real life soap-opera scandals (where someone finds out that Character X isn’t her real father) represent, I think, simple cases of people discovering they’ve been living in the wrong story, that father X is fiction, while father Y is now fact.

ways that destabilize traditional interpretations of them. In *Foe*, women can be fathers but “father” doesn’t mean what we might think it means. In *The Master of Petersburg*, fathers can be sons, but “son” doesn’t mean what it used to mean. In both cases, the role of narrative interferes with and complicates foundational suppositions and reinforces the nightmarish uncertainty that characterizes both books.

As Spivak, Burnett and Maher have noted, there is a kind of gender reversal in Susan’s relationship with Foe. Susan takes the dominant position in their sexual encounter and eventually begins to think of Foe as a “mistress, or even...a wife” (*Foe* 152). The previously unthreatened Foe does “not seem easy” (*Foe* 139) with much of this, and, if we operate inside commonplace frameworks that equate femininity with subordination and masculinity with the dominant position, it is possible to conclude that Susan has succeeded in directing Foe rather than the reverse. As I have already indicated, I do not think this is the case. In this novel, the masculine position is the inferior and vulnerable one (even if a woman occupies that masculine position). In *Foe*, “he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force” (*Foe* 124). And if Susan’s endless waiting and confusion demonstrate anything it is that she lacks the force, narrative and otherwise, to direct her own life. At least as far as the relationship between Susan and Foe is concerned, the last word definitely belongs to the wife, the mother,

Foe.<sup>51</sup> As a result, he disposes over the greatest force, the force to direct and mold the content of lives, real and imaginary. Consequently, the "mistress" becomes the master.<sup>52</sup>

In this construction, Foe, as mother, acts as parent to the story that Susan fathers, while Susan, after planting the seed, disappears. In effect, she becomes "the Man-muse" (*Foe* 126) for whom she once waited, and she learns that there *is* such a thing as a "god who visit[s] authoresses in the night" to make "their pens flow" (*Foe* 126). This might seem like angelic elevation except that the tenuous position of such a deity makes its ethereal presence easily and routinely obscured by the corporeal reality of the mother. In the end, it is the author, the mother, who disposes over the greatest force. Like the Irishwoman in Foe's example, Susan, it seems, will "rest most uneasy in [her] grave knowing to what interpreter [her] story has been consigned" (*Foe* 124). Like the soon to be executed Irishwoman, Susan is on the verge of being erased, and her story will be reared by someone else, namely Foe. Crudely, it is the mother who decides how the child, here the text, is to be raised, what it is to wear, and how it is to live and breathe. Susan says, "it is I who have disposal of...the story of his island" (*Foe* 45), but it is clear that Susan only carries the seed of a story. Like Dostoevsky, she confronts the

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<sup>51</sup> Obviously, in Coetzee's text the last word, or at least the last utterance, belongs to Friday. Some critics have viewed this as an indication that Friday has the greatest moral, if not physical, literary or political force in the book.

<sup>52</sup> This is, obviously, slippery material, and, given this slippage it's tough sometimes to find the fixed point from which to begin these investigations. Maher, for example, uses the sequence between Foe and Susan as an instance of patriarchal domination. Citing Cixous, she sees it as instance where there seems to be "no need for the mother [because] it is the father who acts as, is, the mother" (288). I agree that a role switch has occurred, but I think that Maher's argument only works if we maintain gender-essentialist divisions. Of course, I agree that a man can assume the role of mother (and that the novel demonstrates this), but I am much more interested in constructed roles than gender divisions. In Cixous' above construction there seems to be a confusion between the gendered realities of men and women and the culturally sustained constructs of father and mother. In my view, *Foe* demonstrates the marginality of the father's role through a female character (Susan) much more than it demonstrates the centrality of the father through a male character (Foe).

limitations of the paternal role; she must accept that she is, in the end, the absent father of her text, the debatable source of a concrete entity. The obvious conclusion is that, in Coetzee's construction, paternity is a form of marginality; the "begetter" (*Foe* 126), although essential to the process of production, can have his (or in this case her) stamp overwhelmed by the palimpsest created by the mother's disposal over the last word, the final presence.

Begetting, then, is a dubious and dangerous process. Beyond the clichéd construction of the care-free, irresponsible seed-bearer which equates masculinity with "erotic acrobatics" and "promiscuous adventurism" (Gilmore 41), paternity can create the serious and problematic possibilities of dissipation and erasure.<sup>53</sup> In *Foe*, the father, Susan, struggles in vain to have her presence felt in her issue, struggles to "guide and amend" (*Foe* 123) the direction of her offspring. Her failure amounts not just to excommunication and separation from her issue, but to self-effacement and self-disintegration. It's not just that she fails to impact upon the story; it's that the story has such a catastrophic impact upon her.

Fathers face similar troubles in *The Master Of Petersburg*. Dostoevsky confronts the problems of paternal fictionality directly in his conflicts with Maximov, who reminds him of his inconsequential position. Although Dostoevsky feels that Pavel is the child of his heart, he has no definite claim to him, legally or biologically, and, as both Nechaev and Maximov note, this means that he is not, and has not ever been, the young man's

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<sup>53</sup> In Gilmore's study, he notes that, in many cultures, the search for endless sexual conquests belongs to a youthful stage of masculine development which is eventually subordinated to the adult, community-oriented, processes associated with providing for dependents (41-2). A character like Deighton Boyce, is, it seems, on the cusp of this transition.

father. If this is so, then Dostoevsky, like the subjects in Gilmore's study, becomes prone to the debilitating suspicion/accusation that "his loins are useless", "that he has failed at being a man" (42). The conversation with Maximov demonstrates how completely Dostoevsky has been erased from Pavel's life. As step-father, he has no definite place in the disposal of Pavel's affairs, and Maximov reminds him that even Dostoevsky's much-reduced "writ of guardianship [has] expired," that "a man of twenty-one is his own master" (MP 34).<sup>54</sup> These explicit rejections and reminders demand that Dostoevsky admit his own irrelevance, his own insignificance in these important matters, something he already seems to suspect when he thinks, "in a child a feature can take its perfect form while in the parent it seems a copy" (MP 13). As already indicated, he later streamlines this suspicion into the direct conclusion that "The father [is the] faded copy of the son" (MP 67). Like Susan, Dostoevsky aspires toward presence, but confronts absence. More specifically, "the son" overwhelms the father, makes him a secondary figure, a copy of himself insofar as he exists at all. This is, of course, a reconfiguration of *Foe's* concern with "the last word" and "the greatest force"; the son becomes his own master, while the father aimlessly searches for a place to belong. Like Susan's experience with the story of her daughter, Dostoevsky's experience with the idea of Pavel undermines his ability to perceive himself. To use the already cited example, "He cannot distinguish Pavel from himself. They are the same person; and that person is no more and no less than a

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<sup>54</sup> In *Disgrace*, the protagonist is similarly preoccupied with technical and precise delineations of fatherhood: "Technically, he is old enough to be her father, but then, technically, one can be a father at twelve" (1).

thought" (MP 21).<sup>55</sup> As in *Foe*, the child's presence leaks into the father-figure's self perception and eclipses the father's attempt to organize and perceive his/her life.

This is not, of course, to present Dostoevsky as a simple victim, just to establish a certain set of structural relations. Like Susan, Dostoevsky is involved in a mismatched struggle which does not, or at least should not, absolve him of his own crimes. The essentially spousal conflict between Foe and Susan, is recast in the Oedipal<sup>56</sup> conflict between Dostoevsky and Pavel. In both cases, losers and winners aren't differentiated on moral grounds. It's not so much that Foe and Pavel seem to wilfully *abuse* the father-figures; they just dispose over greater force, and this strategic advantage has negative consequences for others.<sup>57</sup> It is, I think, abundantly clear that the fathers are prepared to fight dirty, that their defeats don't result from their high-minded dignity. As I've already suggested, Susan's handling of Cruso and Friday is just an amateur impression of Foe's handling of her. Similarly, Dostoevsky's desire to write "a book that... Anna Sergeyevna, its true begetter would never see" (MP 134) demonstrates his willingness to diminish the presence of begetters in situations where he assumes the maternal role.

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<sup>55</sup> Nechaev's machismo evades these quandaries in a typically straightforward and unequivocal way. Speaking about fathers, he says that "their real sin, the one they never confess, is greed. They want everything for themselves" (158). Perceived in this way, the complex relationship between father and son is recast in terms of simple conflict, a conflict Nechaev wins through a simple assertion that amounts to a kind of figurative parricide. When he says, "I am my own father now. I have made myself over," (194), he installs himself in *both* roles and thereby avoids both the possibility of debt (to father) and displacement (by son). Like the father-mothers in Thomas' myths, he posits himself as the only necessary entity.

<sup>56</sup> The Oedipal nature of the conflict is, I think, firmly established by the fact that Dostoevsky's new wife is closer to Pavel's age than his own, a reality that makes both their direct rivalry and its sexual connotations more acute.

<sup>57</sup> I don't mean to overlook the fact that Pavel is dead (and that this suggests he hasn't fared so well), but it is clear that Pavel's force is greater than Dostoevsky's, something Dostoevsky explicitly acknowledges when he says, "there is a measure to all things now, including the truth, and that measure is Pavel" (MP 167).

More poignantly, Dostoevsky's appropriation of Pavel's diaries and Pavel's story can be seen as a desperate attempt to regain the last word, to resist the erasure of the father by literally inserting himself into Pavel's diary, a diary marked both by a romantic fictionalization of Isaev, and a mocking anecdotal vilification of Dostoevsky himself.<sup>58</sup> Like Susan before him, Dostoevsky feels abused by his position as fictionalized subject in another's story, by Pavel's exploitation of events which are "not wholly untrue" (*MP* 151) but which produce a "subtly twisted" (*MP* 151) version of Dostoevsky's character, a character Dostoevsky rejects.

The father contests his son's negative portrayal by writing his own story, "The Child," in which he transforms Pavel's act of kindness to Maria into one of petty cruelty. The contested territory of Pavel's diary, like the malleability of Dostoevsky's soul (which is sometimes indistinguishable from Pavel's) reflects the complexity of the relationship between father and son, one which includes, but extends beyond, Dostoevsky's reductive belief that "fathers and sons [are] foes to the death" (*MP* 239). Watson has suggested that Dostoevsky is "ambivalent in his love for his stepson" (Watson 50), but I think it's much more accurate to say that his love is impossibly complicated and contains expressions that look like resentment, hostility and confused indifference. Whatever their crimes against each other, it is clear that Dostoevsky harbours hopes that Pavel was "in his deepest being a son of his stepfather" (*MP* 206), and it is at least possible that Pavel's writing was, in some capacity "a way of reaching his father" (*MP* 137). The links

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<sup>58</sup> Pavel's apparent affection for Isaev and apparent distaste for Dostoevsky seems to justify Dostoevsky's thought that, "if there must be sons, [it is] better to father them at a distance, like a frog or a fish" (*MP* 207) than to struggle for involvement or inclusion, that total disconnection and disinterest is the safest route to take.



between the father and son, between begetter and begotten are, it seems, always either too strong or not strong enough. The textual war, like its Oedipal counterpart, is one in which Dostoevsky and Pavel connect with, and at the same time displace, each other.

Characteristically, the anxiety of and for influence extends beyond the textual level. The effort to live eternally in words parallels the father's desire to live on and be seen in the son, while, at the same time, Pavel's writing both comes from ("With a writer for a father what do you expect?" *MP* 136) and effaces the father.<sup>49</sup> The under- and over-determined nature of the relationship is such that the truth is finally impossible to discover or maintain. The intermingling of Dostoevsky and Pavel in both the figurative (insofar as it takes place in the father's imagination) and the literal (insofar as Dostoevsky actually takes over Pavel's diary) sense demonstrates the degree to which each is haunted by the other. Each is in a perpetual struggle to first "conjure" up (through imagination and incantation), then block out the other. And these unreliable attempts to make up a story world which is, in Coetzee's terms, a "place [that] has a less and less discernible relation to ...daily life"<sup>50</sup> (*Doubling the Point* 205) demand some kind of re-calibration after almost every utterance. More specifically, each must have the final word, each must

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<sup>49</sup> Dostoevsky sees Pavel's imaginary Isaev as part of a "sickness of this age of ours" that results in "young people turning their backs on their parents, their homes, their upbringing, because they are no longer to their liking" (*MP* 137).

<sup>50</sup> In his essay, Coetzee is arguing for the autonomy of fiction by positioning it in a separate and distinct space which is not continuous with his day to day life. In the case of his characters, however, the strict boundaries cannot be established and the result is a "less discernible" and frequently confusing intermingling of the separate spheres of narrative and real life.

dictate the final parameters of the story of the other in order to clarify his perception of himself.<sup>61</sup>

### **Silence as Narrative Utterance: The Pros and Cons of Private Narrative**

The many and various dangers of begetting narrative make Cruso's reticence about story, and Friday's complete refusal to communicate seem like viable modes of resistance. Susan, by proffering her story to Foe, has, in a sense, invited the vampire into her house while Cruso and Friday have refused, and, whatever else they suffer, they are, at least, not implicated in the creation of their own difficulties. As many critics have noted, Friday's silence prevents him from becoming source material: given the proper amount of "seed," Foe easily overwhelms Susan, but Friday's silence is finally impenetrable, and in the end, nobody has "spoken the unspoken" (*Foe* 141) because no one can locate Friday well enough to manipulate him. Thus, he avoids becoming source material, or, worse still, "native informant" (*Orientalism* 324).

The implications of this refusal go beyond the realm of narrative proper and into the broader fields of both discourse in general and postcolonial discourse in particular. Consider Said's statement on the nature of "Oriental" scholarship:

No Arab or Islamic scholar can afford to ignore what goes on in scholarly journals, institutes and universities in the United States and Europe; the

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<sup>61</sup> In this sense, Dostoevsky, by surviving his son, actually usurps the son's role. His continued existence gives him the greatest force and, consequently, gains him the final word. As Margaret Scanlon notes, this allows for "Dostoevsky's appropriation of his stepson's fiction. We know that [Pavel's] Karamzin will become [Dostoevsky's] old Karamazov without so much as a footnote" (Scanlon 475).

converse is not true... The predictable result is the Oriental students (and Oriental professors) still want to come and sit at the feet of American Orientalists...In relation to their superiors, The European and American Orientalists, he [the Oriental scholar] will remain only a 'native informant'. Indeed, this is his only role in the West. (*Orientalism* 324)<sup>62</sup>

Unlike these scholars, Friday thinks he *can* afford to ignore Susan, and, as a result he does not inform on himself. He refuses to be a resource to be manufactured elsewhere, and, in so doing, retains a measure of elusive dignity. In my terms, he refuses to beget the story that will finally have him sitting at the feet of his "superiors."

Instead, Friday's dubiously designated pictogram<sup>63</sup> and his forceful but undecipherable utterance in the final section assert presence while simultaneously frustrating efforts to fix him into a particular place in Foe's, or even Coetzee's, narrative. It allows him to be, as Brian MacAskill and Jeanne Collier note, "a character inscribed within [the] text, but not quite assimilated by it" (451). Friday's characterization is, in effect, rooted in his non-characterization; his most salient feature is his silence, a silence

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<sup>62</sup> Although this kind of discourse-oriented approach is outside my scope, it is worth remembering that some postcolonial critics feel that Literary Theory (and its manifestations in Postcolonial Theory) similarly denigrate non-Western experiences and articulations because, as Benita Parry notes, "the social authority on which [theoretical] rhetoric relies... is grounded in the cognitive systems of the West" (39). That is, postcolonial theory performs an essentially colonialist act by forcing "natives," or at least enticing them, to view and articulate themselves according to the presumably more sophisticated and universal frameworks of the First World intelligentsia.

<sup>63</sup> Some critics, most notably Attwell and Spivak, have attempted to decode Friday's writing, and apply it to various arguments, but, to me, such an effort seems misdirected. In a book so endlessly preoccupied with designation, it seems fruitless to *impose* meaning onto deliberately delimited sections of the text. Indeed, the process of pinning down what Friday meant seems to be at odds with his entire function in the book as a marker of fictive resistance. When Friday has struggled so consistently not to give himself away (as Susan does), it seems irresponsible for the sensitive critic to forcibly take him from himself.

that seems to be have been caused by “slavers” (*Foe* 22) who seem to have cut out his tongue.

This, at any rate, is the overwhelming perception inside and outside the confines of the novel. Susan, Foe, and, as far as I have been able to determine, all critics of *Foe* operate under this assumption. Still, I would suggest that that these assumptions are faulty ones, and that there are real reasons to believe, or at least allow for the possibility, that Friday’s silence is a voluntary gesture of defiance. In my view, the story of Friday’s tongue is itself a form of narrative manipulation that has enveloped Coetzee’s characters and his critics alike. The credulous belief that Friday has no tongue is rooted in its narrative persuasiveness, a persuasiveness that is, all by itself, enough to supersede the desire for direct evidence of its validity, and, seemingly, enough even to defuse direct evidence to the contrary.

The short version of my argument might entail little more than a single, direct statement: I challenge any reader to produce any proof that Friday has no tongue. After several readings, I’m convinced there isn’t any.

The long version treats the idea of the missing tongue as a concrete example of the process by which narrative supposition becomes incontrovertible fact. Early in the novel, we learn that Susan sees Cruso as an unreliable speaker. During their time on the island together, his various stories make it impossible to “know what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling” (*Foe* 12). When Cruso tells her that Friday has no tongue and attempts to show her, “it is too dark” (*Foe* 22) for her to see, and she never seeks verification in the future. Long after her return to England, she tells Friday that her

idea about him is a “guess merely” (*Foe* 85), and she admits that, “when [Cruso] asked me to look, I would not” (*Foe* 85). As far as I can ascertain, this non-evidence is at the root of any belief that Friday is tongueless; Cruso said so and Susan believed.

Despite this questionable foundation, Friday’s tonguelessness gradually drifts in the direction of certainty such that, by the time Foe and Susan begin their discussions, it is taken to be a certainty by both of them. Foe, elsewhere so sensitive to the complexities of doubt, allows for no contingency when he speaks of the ways in which “the slavers served Friday when they robbed him of his tongue” (*Foe* 150). By the end of the book, both Foe and Susan *know* for certain that Friday has no tongue, and so, something that began as an unverified assertion from an unreliable source (Cruso) eventually comes to direct the foundational assumptions of a godlike figure (Foe). The implications of this slippage are, I think, fairly clear: in the right contextual and narrative frameworks, the most dubious and unsubstantiated claims can reach, and have influence at, the highest levels of power, levels which have the ability to shape and direct the content of people’s lives.

In some ways, this is just another example of narrative overwhelming reality (or at least refusing to yield to it). Susan and Foe believe Friday has no tongue because it seems to have “the substance of the truth” (*Foe* 51). Because they exist so entirely in a world of narrative constructs, they do not appeal to proof so much as plausibility. The idea that Friday has no tongue holds together a lot better than the idea that he has some preternatural capacity for restraint, and, this being the case, they see no need for further investigation. This is not really surprising. As I have noted throughout this study, an

effective story does not need to tell the truth, but rather to select and position a number of “markers” to create a persuasive whole. In a world like Coetzee’s (and, quite possibly, like our own) where everything seems bound up in stories, one’s position is determined by one’s narrative currency, by one’s ability to buy and maintain the reader’s interest and participation. When Susan tells Friday, “we will never make our fortunes... by being merely what we are, or were” (*Foe* 82) she highlights the link between a certain kind of success and narrative transformation. Narrative promises a certain kind of existence and perhaps significance, but it also reduces the individual to the status of narrative object.

This idea is, of course, central to a great deal of Coetzee’s writing and has some obvious applications to the South African context in which the novel was written. Real, independent people get obscured by a “master narrative [of] pernicious racist myths” (Korang 186) that reduces human beings to the status of objects, of empty markers. The needs of the story-teller (the one who disposes over the greatest force, perhaps the apartheid South African government) override the identities and demands of the subjects, the characters, who must live inside the story itself. This process has been fairly well-documented, and, as a partial result, fairly well-investigated.

The problem for me is that so many of the novel’s critics seem to have participated in the same process insofar as they have used the absence of Friday’s tongue as a foundational principle for their arguments. They need a tongueless Friday to proceed with their own projects, and so, in a fairly serious sense, *they take away his tongue* and use him toward their own ends. Consider the following statement of Coetzee’s:

It's perhaps a mark of all critical activity to try to swallow one kind of discourse into another kind of discourse. For example, in academic criticism to swallow literature into a certain kind of academic discourse. ("Grubbing" 5)

I think this is what happens relative to Friday's tongue. The messages of the novel are swallowed by the demands of certain kinds of postcolonial criticism which, in critical contexts, operates as its own master narrative, and seduces people into certain conclusions. And, although it's an academic commonplace (if not an outright necessity) to put books to work, usually without consent, for critical purposes, there's something more troubling when we actually defy, or at least ignore, the contents of the primary source.

I do not mean to suggest any wilfully malicious behaviour in these critical activities: the commitments of most of these writers are, I think, pretty clear, and the things they do with the assumption of tonguelessness are, as far as I can tell, always well-intentioned if not always well-advised. I think their assumptions are best addressed as a critical phenomenon which, on its own, demonstrates how really difficult it is to resist the seduction of narrative and the seduction of discourse. Even though much of the work on *Foe* deals specifically with uncertainty and doubt, the postcolonial critic gravitates toward instances of colonial mutilation because such mutilation represents a deep well for critical analysis. I would argue that, in some odd fashion, the postcolonial critic *wants* a tongueless Friday because of the critical opportunities such a character would provide in

the same way that Foe wants Cannibals and adventure.<sup>64</sup> This desire, I think, accounts for the unexamined possibility that Friday is merely silent. Thus, the critic, like Susan, seems afraid to look into Friday's mouth because s/he is reluctant to face the complications that might reside there. Seduced by the demands of their own discourse, the demands of their own academic world, these critics fail or refuse to confront an independent entity (the novel *Foe*) and to allow it to communicate on its own terms. The book, the character and the tongue have all been conscripted into participating in a dialogue which might not be a very good fit.

In the face of this, I suggest only that we do not presume too much about the unrevealed Friday, that we take Attwell's idea about "the absolute limits of [the] powers of authorization and signification" (117) to its logical conclusion. At the very least, I suggest that we might want to contest the authority of those who, by their own admission, don't know much about him. There is, or should be, a distinction between a character's misapprehension (or more properly a character's non-apprehension) of another character, and the reader's apprehension of the text. Susan's belief about Friday need not be the reader's, and, as I have already tried to suggest, there are specific reasons to doubt her idea. With this in mind, it becomes possible to read Friday's silence as an epic gesture of defiance, a gesture that dwarfs his unconventional writing and his erasing of the slate. If we imagine, at least provisionally, that Friday *does* have a tongue, then his silence

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<sup>64</sup> Again, I am not suggesting that "the Western Critic" wants racial mutilation in any fashion whatsoever. Quite the opposite, the critic seems to want a compelling fictional *image* of mutilation so that s/he can use it to combat mutilation and oppression in (what I persist in calling) the real world.



becomes a kind of heroic restraint, a triumph of the individual will against the insistent demands of his environment.

This said, I'm not at all certain what to do with this silence, voluntary or otherwise. The idea that silence is its own counter-discursive utterance has some real appeal, but, as Worthington rightly notes, it seems to be lacking in practical applicability. It is, perhaps, "a dangerous utopian gesture" (Korang 183), a too complex response in a too straightforward situation.<sup>65</sup> If silence keeps Friday free from disguised *narrative* manipulation, it doesn't seem to do much to protect him from direct physical manipulation. Susan moves him around largely because he doesn't articulate any objections, and, even if the reader sees his silence as containing "a certain libertarian power ... it is a freedom purchased at a self-defeating, self-destructive cost" (Worthington 260). He combats voice-appropriation with a voicelessness that brings him no closer to achieving his aims (whatever they are).<sup>66</sup> If this is so, then Friday makes a fruitless idealistic gesture in a dangerous climate. Roberts has suggested that Friday, having no language, "cannot learn to live in the symbolic" (91), yet, his silence, which he goes to great lengths to maintain, seems fundamentally symbolic. On what level does it operate if not the figurative? There are no, or at least there do not seem to be any, practical advantages to his willingness to let Susan direct his life, and, if this is so, he must be motivated by something beyond the literal level, by a desire to transcend the materiality

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<sup>65</sup> Korang is specifically responding to theoretical interpretations of Friday (specifically Tiffin's and Spivak's) which emphasize his position in discourse rather than his position in "realpolitik" (184).

<sup>66</sup> In keeping with the desire not to assume too much, it is, I guess, possible that he *is* happy with things as they are, that he has no aims, that the notion that he must want more comes from Susan and from the reader.

of his circumstances and to exist, and perhaps even communicate, on an entirely different, more abstract, level.

If this is so, then Friday is the most rarefied of literary practitioners, and, like most rarefied artists, he runs the risk of speaking to an empty room. Under this new provisional interpretation Friday is not indifferent to the constitutive and transcendent powers of stories, but a kind of avant-garde artiste who practises "fine" rather than "folk" art. Susan calibrates the value of her story through the expectations of her public, through the presence and relevance of "folks", the ability of the audience to appreciate and apply her story to their lives is of the utmost importance.<sup>97</sup> Friday, it seems, has different aspirations. Although manipulated by Susan in his day-to-day life, he leap-frogs past her in the realm of narrative proper, or, at least, in the hierarchy of literary creation. Near the end of the novel, "the man seated at the table [is] not Foe. It [is] Friday, with Foe's robes on his back and Foe's wig... In his hand, poised over Foe's papers, he [holds] a quill" (*Foe* 151). Despite her obvious and persistent preoccupation with narrative, Susan never even approaches this status. While Susan clearly sits at the feet of Foe, Friday installs himself at the seat of narrative invention; he displaces Foe as literary master, and occupies a position of godlike authority. As Foe readily admits, Friday's text is no more "foul" (*Foe* 151) than his own, and, if it is no less foul, one assumes, it is no less potent.

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<sup>97</sup> Indeed, *Robinson Crusoe* has been treated as "an anonymous folktale" (James 2) and "Robinsonalter" has been used "to describe the point at which the twelve year-old boy discovers himself on the island of responsible life" (James 2). Such examples demonstrate the degree to which the story derives a good deal of its force through its applications in day-to-day life.

It is unwise, I think, to suppose too much about the nature of the pages with "rows of the letter *o* tightly packed together" (*Foe* 152), unwise also to make conjectures about the narrator of the fourth section of the novel, a section which follows almost immediately after Friday sits at the desk. The "o" may well mean omega, as Attwell and Spivak suggest; the narrator of the fourth section may well be Coetzee, or a character he has constructed. It's really too difficult to say. Like many a literary genius and many a literary fraud, Friday seems to create a text that defies the reader's attempt to situate and understand it. It is, as some critics would have it, a "writerly" text, one which uses writing itself as its primary referent without regard for readership or transparency.

## Conclusion

If Friday has, in fact, constructed a kind of alienating, avant-garde text, he has, I suppose, subscribed to the kind of aesthetic Coetzee himself seems to forward in both *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*. The metafictional intermingling reaches its fullest expression when the fictional character begins to write in the style of the extra-literary author. Like Coetzee, Friday seems to resist the homogeneity of false universals to create a text that conforms to a highly idiosyncratic set of principles. In its most positive sense, this is the construction of a text that refuses to be the transparent marker of history as it currently exists. It is a writing exercise, by which the writer learns "how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine... on one's own terms" (*Doubling the Point* 364). It's a text which reflects Coetzee's

expressed belief that, in today's circumstances, under the pressing demands of history and politics, "the novel...has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry ("The Novel Today" 3). Both he and Friday choose rivalry and, consequently produce a type of writing that "operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions checkable by history ("The Novel Today" 3). By yielding precisely nothing to Susan's demands, Friday acts as a direct rival to Susan and to Foe. Operating under his own procedures, he both protects, and asserts, his own story, and, in the terms that I have been using throughout this study, resists grander narratives (most specifically the publicly focussed projects of Susan and Foe) with a much more localized and idiosyncratic form of writing, perhaps even storytelling.

In some ways, this is the fulfilment of the process of narrative withdrawal I have been tracking throughout this study. What began as an investigation into one man's effort to transform himself into an epic figure found in war stories concludes with another man's construction of an intensely personal, publicly undecipherable text. Guy loses himself in the grand narrative; Friday, it seems, finds, or at least asserts, himself in private writing. Insofar as Friday maintains the sovereignty of an individual vision and refuses to sacrifice it (or betray it) to public demands, he is a successful and rigorous artist, an author of the highest order.

But, it took me a long time and a lot of thinking to arrive at this conclusion, and I am a well-educated, and possibly intelligent guy. At the very least, I devote a lot of time to thinking about stories, and I suspect there aren't a lot of other people who have got the

same amount of time or the inclination. So, while this study has consistently considered the inward turn as a viable way of resisting conscription by grand narrative, I would like to suggest that there are practical limits to the value of internal focus. Given the far too publicly-oriented behaviours of the vast majority of the characters I've addressed, a move toward private systems of value is advisable, but this does not, I don't think, guarantee that all forms of private orientation are productive. With the scales tilted so heavily to one side, I have been placing most of the weight on just one side, but this does not mean I am not looking for balance or that things cannot go too far the other way.

There is a real possibility that the complete insularity of Friday's expression might create new and different problems. He may well be constructing a complicated and elusive text, but who is supposed to read it? The answer to this question is crucial because the effort to establish inner space cannot, I think, be allowed to collapse into simple solipsism. Insofar as Friday resists Susan and Foe, I think his act must be seen as productive, but the real possibility that he is simply amusing or, worse, indulging, himself must, I think, be examined. More poignantly, given the similarities in their aesthetics, the critique of Friday's approach might well and disappointingly extend to Coetzee himself. For Friday's text (or Coetzee's text) to have value as story it *must* retain communicative value. If it doesn't make sense to *anybody* but the author, it's not a story, just private musing. Friday need not (and even probably should not) be writing for Susan and Foe, but, without audience, story becomes diary<sup>98</sup> and the prospect of positive, productive

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<sup>98</sup> I hope to have established that there are *internal* advantages to self-directed narration (most importantly self-directed action) but these advantages must be communicable for such narration to become "story" in the conventional sense.

fictive force vanishes. Obviously, I think Coetzee's books *do* communicate (at least enough to fuel a lengthy chapter), but the suggestion that he belongs only to "professional academics at the traditional English speaking universities" (Glenn 26) is a significant one and highlights the danger of any aesthetic that is too exclusive and insular.<sup>99</sup> Self-directed self-narration need not be synonymous with self-indulgent self-congratulation. Most importantly, the opacity of Friday's and Coetzee's style compromises its seductive power and, consequently, its ability to construct new and different frameworks for the reader. Efforts to produce more self-responsive stories and to refuse the self-abnegation of grand narrative are, of course, good ones, but masturbation is not the *a priori* solution to prostitution, and designation is not the enemy of human dignity. In *The Master of Petersburg*, the frustrated Dostoevsky asks, "when was it last that words could be trusted to travel from heart to heart?" (*MP* 195), as if such a transmission were impossible. But his pessimism is unfounded, and the answer to his question is "lately and often."

Words can and do travel into people's hearts; that's why epic narrative is so tough to resist. People have stories stuck so deep inside them that it's often impossible to get them out. Acts of narrative resistance must attempt to travel the distance from heart to heart if they have any hope of success. Hearts are many and various, and one size does not fit all, but fiction has got to go after them if our stories are to mean anything, or do anything, at all.

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<sup>99</sup> Personally, I think that the academy represents a legitimate discursive community, and that a certain degree of local dialect is appropriate, but the public's reaction to this dialect or jargon (and the widespread indifference to "high art" in general) demonstrates that certain contemporary stories (i.e. the postmodern aesthetic) lack the seductive power of the older narratives they're trying to replace or displace.

This is just a dressed up way of insisting that the problems with grand narrative are not to be solved by narrative dissolution, but by more careful narrative construction and more discerning narrative consumption. Along with Kim Worthington, I would suggest that “only *within* a framework of shared signification do we have the potential authority to co-write our meaning and our narratives of selfhood” (275), and (to abandon my plain-speak for a second), that “the construction of a subject’s sense of self should be understood as a *creative* narrative process achieved within a plurality of intersubjective *community* protocols” (Worthington 13, emphasis mine). What this means is just that we must maintain the crucial distinctions between shared, imposed and non-narratives; one cannot escape the second with the third, and only the first houses the possibility of dignified, self-directed, and, above all, meaningful, existence.

## Conclusion



This study has, perhaps, seemed a bit negative in its orientation toward both stories and critical discourse in general. It has often viewed narrative as something that disrupts the individual's ability to think, feel, and act productively, and it has frequently suggested that certain critical approaches diminish and derail, rather than expand and enhance, our ability to confront and appreciate particular fictional worlds. As such, the study might seem to be sceptical about the value of both reading books in the first place, and about talking about them in the second place. Nothing could be further from its real motivations, and so it seems appropriate to close with some more optimistic notes on what this study hopes to have accomplished and on what literary (and, in a broader sense, cultural) criticism can do when it is done well.

The reasons to be optimistic are not, of course, unrelated to the reasons to be apprehensive; stories are powerful things, and, as the investigation into masculinity indicates, they can be really dangerous when structured in the overarching terms of grand narratives. The demands of epic masculinity and the need to fit inside its storyline, trouble most of the characters in this study, and demonstrate the pitfalls of large-scale story-structures. So too, however, stories have seductive, redemptive, and subversive (in the good sense) power, and, as most of us know, really good literature tends to confront, rather than confirm, clichés, to challenge, rather than affirm, easy generalities, and to make unusual connections, not enforce strict and stable boundaries. However much stories limit and harm the characters in these novels, the novels themselves (the individual stories of Waugh, Selvon, Marshall, and Coetzee) tend to expand and enhance the awareness of their readers. Grand narrative is what great literature contests, and this

study argues not for fewer stories or against literary criticism, but *for* a type of literary criticism that responds to the idiosyncrasies that make literature as good and valuable as it is. In terms of both its founding concepts and its operational execution, this study has attempted a kind of literary analysis that corresponds to the nature and diversity of great literature, not grand narrative.

As a result, the possibly amorphous set of relations that inform this study have not fit very easily into any of the established critical patterns, and several of the major assertions in this project seem to directly oppose some of the more prevalent trends in contemporary criticism. Assertions like those that suggest Waugh might be a postcolonial writer, or that Marshall's "strong, assertive woman" might just be a conventionally masculine figure, are not, I think, commonplace ones, but the literature itself is not commonplace, and the search for commonplace templates to deal with it is, in all likelihood, bound either to fail, or else to succeed only in dubious terms. As I hope to have proven, the process of linking disparate works of literature inside an emergent and flexible critical approach is not unlike the literary process of stipulating and constructing a particular fictional world. Both projects depend upon a subtlety of thought and a willingness (perhaps even an obligation) to engage previously unconsidered complications, and to forego easy and well-known assumptions. Such projects are, necessarily, fraught, and the abundance of really bad novels attests to the dangers of venturing outside the terra firma of established practice and into the unmapped world of "creative" thought. Still, the presence of some really wonderful novels is enough to keep many of us coming back, to keep us reading and exploring fictional worlds, bucking the

too-obvious logic that the novel we have in our hands isn't likely to be life-changing or wholly original. We don't read fiction to affirm what we know; we read to discover what we don't know and we're disappointed when we find the new fictional world to be too much like the ones we've seen before.

This critical study has attempted something similar in its orientation both to the ten books, and to the critical climate, it addresses. In its approach to the individual novels and in its efforts to link them together, it has attempted to discover new critical avenues, not affirm stock assumptions. Such a project necessarily creates problems for established procedures, but this should not necessitate any hostility between old and new approaches; this project is just a reminder that a rigid critical apparatus cannot account for dynamic artistic products. More directly, it argues for more dynamic, ambitious, inventive, and, yes, dangerous critical approaches, approaches which *make* problems as much as they settle them, and which answer to the diversities and idiosyncrasies of their subjects.

In 1990, on the verge of post-apartheid South Africa, ANC member Albie Sachs argued for a view of South African art that escaped "the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination" (117), and for a type of artistic and cultural commentary that escaped the trappings of "solidarity criticism" (118). Even in the face of the most pressing types of "real world" political and social concerns, Sachs recognized that "the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions" (118), and warned of the serious dangers inherent in viewing art "as if it were just another kind of missile-firing apparatus" (118). If it is true that "a gun is a gun is a

gun" (118), that its purpose and mode of expression are decidedly direct and unambiguous, it is also clear that art, and the criticism of art, allow for, even demand, conflicts and ambiguities outside the linear certainties of "missile-firing" devices. However much we want to change the world for the better, policing art, and limiting the "appropriate" forms of critical commentary about it, won't help us.

Ten years ago, Sachs' comments provoked a minor firestorm of responses involving several political, social, and cultural forces. Such responses testify both to the dangers, and to the potential impact, of adventurous, exploratory, criticism. Given the thankfully less aggravated and less poignant conditions which govern this study, I expect no such firestorm here, but, in its own way, I think this project has opened up avenues of discussion and revealed some hidden and not-so-hidden tensions in the relationship between particular texts and particular critical approaches. The works of Waugh, Selvon, Marshall, and Coetzee *can* be linked together in a meaningful and powerful framework, even if they do not fit neatly inside the grand narratives of any existing discourse. This study has attempted to construct just such a framework, using small-scale details and contradictions, not large-scale trends, as its guide. Like so many of the characters it addresses, this project has attempted to construct and trace a small, specific, narrative in the belief that such stories are the ones that are the most worth hearing, the most worth telling, and, given the pervasive nature of narrative, the most worth living.

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