THINKING ABOUT THE END: POSTHISTORY, IDEOLOGY, AND NARRATIVE CLOSURE

BARBARA CAMPBELL ROSE

THINKING ABOUT THE END: POSTHISTORY, IDEOLOGY, AND NARRATIVE CLOSURE

by

Barbara Campbell Rose

A thesis submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
Memorial University of Newfoundland

March 2001

St John's Newfoundland

Abstract

Has history come to an end? The novels under discussion here examine posthistorical paralysis and indicate that the end of history is promoted by the dominant ideology of American culture: the assumption that "America" occupies the millennial site of history's universal terminus. Written during Cold War and post-Cold War anxieties about American destiny, these novels confront the teleological premise of that ideology, offering a characteristic suspicion of narrative endings. John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia Fire (1990) reveals how the master narrative of America is structurally exclusive. E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime (1975) and Robert Coover's The Public Burning (1977) examine the teleological plot that presents historical process as natural necessity and reject the closed universe of apocalyptic history. William Burroughs's Cities of the Red Night (1981) and Thomas Pynchon's Vineland (1990) question the paranoid suspicion of conspiracy as another way of thinking about the end; both deploy a strategic nostalgia that aims to recover what triumphal history tries to disavow. Don DeLillo's Underworld (1997) challenges the political cynicism of the posthistoric end and rejects both the triumphalist view of a completed history and the pessimist view of an exhausted history. Contradiction is thus a privileged term, yet Underworld also seeks to resolve it, answering the call of the dominant ideology's millennial

seduction by stressing what remains emphatically uncompleted at the supposed end of history. All these novels suggest that closure is to be both resisted and desired, revealing a common utopian element that obliges us to consider the appeal of history completing itself when universal justice is finally achieved. The end of history might be impossible, these novels argue, but they insist that its impossibility is the very condition of possibility for ethical action in history. Philadelphia Fire, Ragtime, The Public Burning, Cities of the Red Night, Vineland, and Underworld urge that we conceive of the end of history as a necessary goal but reject determinist History and the calculated alibis it provides.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the financial assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the careful supervision and encouragement of Dr. Jerry A. Varsava in the writing of this dissertation. Commentary from Dr. James Berger, Dr. Noreen Golfman, and Dr. Bernice Schrank was especially useful in my revision process. I would also like to thank my family and friends, particularly Danine Farquharson, for their support. My son, Adam, lived with this dissertation as much as I did, and to him I owe a special gratitude.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction:

Thinking about the End

Are announcements of the end of history premature? We are told from various sources, with various ends in mind, that we currently inhabit posthistory, a historical end-time when not only has history ended but so too have ideology, philosophy, art, science, work, nature . . . The list is seemingly endless.[1] With the "orgy" of modernity supposedly over, history's obituary is the last word. But is this diagnosis of history's arrival at its terminus "the end of the matter," as Lutz Niethammer asks, "as if there were nothing more to be said?" (1).

---

[1] While there are a number of conclusions drawn about the meaning of a posthistorical condition, there is often a general assumption that attempts at fundamental social, political, or cultural change are misguided or even futile. Two different endist arguments, written from contrary political agendas, are exemplary of this position. Both Bill McKibben's The End of Nature (New York: Random House, 1989) and Dinesh D'Souza's The End of Racism (New York: Basic Books, 1995) assume that the present constitutes the end. McKibben sees a present ecological condition so degraded that a worldwide natural catastrophe is imminent. D'Souza argues that race is no longer a meaningful category and therefore equal-opportunity policies are not only outmoded but actual impediments to economic and social progress. The difference between such arguments lies in whether or not the current situation is seen as a satisfactory one. For an intellectual history of end-of-history arguments, see Lutz Niethammer's Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?, trans. Patrick Camiller (London and New York: Verso, 1992), which focuses primarily on the European strand of posthistory and specifically on the German post-war theorizing of former apologists for National Socialism. For a lucid discussion of posthistory in both Europe and the United States, see Perry Anderson's "The Ends of History" in his A Zone of Engagement (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 279-375.

This dissertation argues that there is indeed a good deal still to be said about the end; for, despite the various pronouncements of contemporary "endism," the conventional--and historical--problems remain: how are we to imagine a future? And with what ends in mind? Through a discussion of six American postmodern novels that engage with the potential meanings of history and possible alternative histories, it aims to show that the closure of history often represents an ideological foreclosure. "Posthistory" finds a parallel logic in an apocalyptic sensibility ingrained in American self-definition, what Sacvan Bercovitch terms "the American ideology" whose "controlling metaphor" is "'America' as synonym for human possibility" (Rites 367). This is not to presume that contemporary endism can be entirely subsumed under this dominant ideology, that it can be considered as simply a reflection of the latter. Rather, it is to suggest that only now, with the supposed clearing of the ideological field after the collapse of the Soviet Union, can a globalizing American culture assume the end of history. An analysis of endism in its American utterances can provide a way of understanding how apocalyptic logic structures ways of thinking about the end. In resisting the closure of a prescriptive History that legislates both the future and the past, the novels under discussion here suggest other ways of thinking about the end, thereby restoring the legitimacy of historical thinking that much endism would deny.

The End of History

Symptomatic of contemporary endism is perhaps the best known contribution to the posthistory debate in English-speaking countries made by Francis Fukuyama, first in his "The End of History?" (1989) and then elaborated in The End of History and the Last Man (1992). Something unprecedented has happened, he argues, but that unprecedented something nevertheless follows an inevitable unfolding of history: "As mankind approaches the end of the millennium," Fukuyama writes in his book, "the twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity: liberal democracy" (42).

> It is against this background that the remarkable worldwide character of the current liberal revolution takes on special significance. For it constitutes further evidence that there is a fundamental process at work that dictates a common evolutionary pattern for all human societies--in short, something like a Universal History of mankind in the direction of liberal democracy. (49)

Implicit in this argument is the central assumption that history is necessarily teleological, that it is "a single, coherent, evolutionary process" (End xii). Because Fukuyama believes that the present is historically inevitable, causal explanation becomes the occasion for moral judgment.

The triumphalism of this sort of end-of-history argument assumes that "world history is the world's court of law" (Callinicos 15, 42).[2]

The inevitability of such a Universal History's telos implies not simply closure but also foreclosure. It tends to minimize notions of human subjectivity and finally make irrelevant questions of historical agency as well as trivialize the value of alternative trajectories of history. Many of Fukuyama's immediate critics misunderstood his central distinction between history and History and pointed to armed conflicts and mass slaughters throughout the world as proof that history continues apace. In reply, Fukuyama explained his reliance on the Hegelian understanding of history:

> 'History,' for Hegel, can be understood in the narrower sense of the 'history of ideology,' or the history of thought about first principles, including those governing political and social organization. The end of history then means not the end of worldly events but the end of the evolution of human thought about such first principles. ("Reply" 22)[3]

---

[2] In a critique of the inevitability presupposed by teleological--and, specifically, apocalyptic--models of history, Michael André Bernstein quotes Wilhelm Dilthey's assertion that a past event "is significant insofar as a linkage to the future was achieved in it." An ideal historicism, according to Dilthey, speaks from the vantage point of the end of history. Such a view of history legislates both the future and the past and amounts, in Bernstein's words, to "a secular Last Judgment" (Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History [Berkeley: U California P, 1994], 28-29).

[3] Briefly, Hegel's philosophy of history discerns a rational meaning in the historical process as a whole. Hegel believed that an immanent Idea, glossed in The Philosophy of History as

Historical thinking, in other words, has come to an end. Frank Füredi sees in this argument a "fundamentally apologetic intent," for by maintaining that the present posthistorical situation has fully met the potential for human fulfillment, it excludes the possibility of any further evolution of human thought about alternatives to the present status quo (36). The thrust of The End of History, Füredi believes, is "to encourage low expectations" (42-43). Like Daniel Bell's announcement of the end of ideology thirty years earlier, Fukuyama's end designates any

---

freedom, unfolds itself in a dialectic of historical contradiction and conflict until reason finally becomes fully conscious of itself. The plot of this Universal History is a progression from unconscious instinct to conscious freedom, a process to which the characteristic spirit or genius of successive peoples, cultures or nations contributes. History therefore becomes a self-conscious activity directed at the achievement of rationally defined and deliberately pursued goals. See B.T. Wilkins, Hegel's Philosophy of History (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974); George O'Brien, Hegel on Reason and History (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1975); Stephen Houlgate, Freedom, Truth and History: An Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); and Jean Hyppolite, Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of History, trans. Bond Harris and Jacqueline Bouchard Spurlock (Gainesville: UP Florida, 1996), an influential study first published in 1948 that maintains the impossibility of a complete "break" from Hegel's model of history. Hyppolite observes that the end of history remains ambiguous in Hegel's philosophy, a point that is elaborated by Perry Anderson, who notes that in the original German, the "end" is offered as a purpose rather than as a terminus. Anderson emphasizes that "the actual outcome of Hegel's synthesis is thus a philosophical consummation more than a social end-state" (287).

Although Fukuyama retains the structure of the Hegelian model of history, his understanding of Hegel is a diluted form of Alexandre Kojève's interpretation, but, crucially, stripped of Kojève's reliance on Marx. For a discussion of The End of History's "bowdlerization" of Hegel, see Alex Callinicos, who suggests that the real influence on Fukuyama's argument is Leo Strauss (Theories and Narratives [Durham: Duke UP, 1995], 15-43). See also Anderson's analysis of Fukuyama's strategic use of Kojève (332-33).

alternative thinking as utopian in the pejorative sense.[4] Rather than reading The End of History as little more than propaganda for a conservative political climate, it is important to recognize that, in some ways, it represents contemporary conditions, even if its conclusions are objectionable.

Posthistory is often conflated with postmodernism, the latter a notoriously elastic term.[5] Fredric Jameson, who has proposed that the word "postmodern" be reserved for the weakening of an active sense of history, views Fukuyama's argument as historically significant because it "expresses a blockage of the historical imagination" at a specific cultural moment

---

[4] Bell argued that the American Left's disillusionment with socialism "has meant an end to chiliastic hopes, to millenarianism, to apocalyptic thinking--and to ideology. For ideology, which was once a road to action, has come to a dead end" (The End of Ideology, rev. ed. [New York: Free Press, 1961], 393). Bell does not suggest the disappearance of ideology; rather, like Fukuyama, he views history as a competition of rival ideologies. Both arguments point to the triumph of a single dominant ideology as the end of historical thinking. But, while Fukuyama sees this end as a completion of thought, Bell regards it as an exhaustion.

[5] Gianni Vattimo, for instance, presents the equation as a given when he begins his discussion of "the end of (hi)story" with the observation that "one of the most important points on which the descriptions of the postmodern agree--no matter how different they are from other points of view--is the consideration of postmodernity in terms of 'the end of history'" ("The End of (Hi)story," Chicago Review 35 [1987]: 20). In fact, one of the first uses of the word "postmodern," in Arnold Toynbee's description of how the "complacency of a post-Modern Western bourgeoisie" assumed on the eve of the First World War that it had arrived triumphant at the terminus of history, makes precisely this identification. The end of history repeats itself: "an unprecedently prosperous and comfortable Western middle-class," writes Toynbee, "was taking it as a matter of course that the end of one age of one civilization's history was the end of History itself--at least as far as they and their kind were concerned. They were imagining that, for their benefit, a sane, safe, satisfactory Modern Life had miraculously come to stay as a timeless present" (A Study of History, vol. 9 [London and New York: Oxford UP, 1954], 420-21).

("End" 91). The End of History is not about time so much as it is about space, according to Jameson: the inability to conceive a future different from the present is due to spatial limits rather than temporal ones. When Fukuyama maintains that "we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own, or a future that is not essentially democratic and capitalist" (End 46), his statement is the result not of the end of the Cold War or the end of socialism but of the penetration of all the forms of late capitalism into previously uncommodified zones. With the conquest of nature almost complete (and ecological bans placed on further colonization), the older "heroic" notions of production are now obsolete and thus the future horizon implicit in the conventional conception of development is no longer imaginable. This is a "spatial dilemma," writes Jameson, in both the literal and metaphoric sense: "with the cybernetic and informational revolutions and their consequences for marketing and finance, the entire world is suddenly sewn up into a total system from which no one can secede" (92-93).

The spatial dilemmas Jameson discusses point to a related concern of postmodern theory: the crisis of historical representation.[6] For Jameson, this crisis is a consequence of

---

[6] Jean-François Lyotard would no doubt place The End of History in the tradition of the grand legitimating narratives of modernity that told a history of human emancipation through the development of scientific knowledge and the progressive unfolding of truth. Such variants of salvation history, he maintains, are no longer credible (The Postmodern Condition, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1984], xxiv). It is precisely because Fukuyama's argument attempts to rehabilitate the credibility of historical metanarrative that some of his earliest sympathizers were prominent left intellectuals who saw in his theory an "inverted Marxism" (which his critics on the right also suspected: Samuel

"postmodern hyperspace," the result of a global network of multinational finance and decentered communications, in which the human subject cannot place itself either spatially or temporally (Postmodernism 44). Likewise, Jean Baudrillard locates the crisis in the ascendancy of the simulacrum in the cultural imaginary of late capitalism when use-value degenerates to exchange-value. The "real" is no longer real: it becomes residual. History, for Baudrillard, does not end; instead, it transforms into "the excremental production of the event as waste" (Illusion 79). In either theorization, as Niethammer notes in his discussion of end-of-history arguments, the "problematic of posthistory is not the end of the world but the end of meaning" (3).

I cite Jameson and Baudrillard here as two influential commentators on posthistorical paralysis--the inability to conceive a future different from the present. While not wanting to diminish the importance of their diagnoses, I want to propose that the end-of-history argument in an American setting has a lengthy cultural and sociopolitical past and has recently come into prominence because of continuing struggles regarding the meaning of that much contested object we call "history." History has many different meanings to many different people; it is an experiential process that each of us, as participants in a self-conscious modernity, inhabit. Who will articulate that experience, and who will decide which experience is worthy or even

---

Huntington, for example, charged that Fukuyama's "image of the end of history is straight from Marx" ["No Exit--The Errors of Endism," The National Interest (Fall 1989): 9]). See Callinicos's discussion of how Fukuyama's resuscitation of Hegelianism was immediately attractive to a demoralized left (15-22).

"real," is thus a crucial issue. These decisions regarding the meaning of history--and therefore its goals--are often made by established interests, but not univocally so. There is, I believe, a general desire for the end of history as a utopian desire for the end of contradiction, and "America," however defined, has conventionally occupied the imaginary space of historical completion. Jameson overlooks how America has historically been regarded as the site of history's terminus, something that Baudrillard, in his role as a latter-day Alexis de Tocqueville, recognizes in his America.[7]

Apocalyptic Endings and Beginnings

From its cultural beginnings in Europe, America has represented the end. "America" was an invention of the European imagination well before the first European settlement of the

---

[7] Tocqueville studied America in order to discern the future. "I confess that, in America, I saw more than America," he told his European readers. "I sought there the image of democracy itself, with its inclinations, its character, its prejudices, and its passions, in order to learn what we have to fear or to hope from its progress" (Democracy in America, ed. Richard D. Heffner [New York: New American Library, 1956], 36). Baudrillard sees in the United States that future coming to an end. In America, he tells his European audience that "all has been achieved here in America, in the simplest, most radical way. . . . We philosophize on the end of lots of things, but it is here that they actually come to an end" (trans. Chris Turner [London: Verso, 1988], 97-98). For a survey of French views of America as representative of an ominous future, see Jean-Philippe Mathy, "Out of History: French Readings of Postmodern America," American Literary History 2 (Summer 1990): 267-98.

New World, as Edmundo O'Gorman has shown, and was often conceived as the apocalyptic site of history's redemption. As Douglas Robinson notes, "the very idea of America in history is apocalyptic, arising as it did out of the historicizing of apocalyptic hopes in the Protestant Reformation" (xi). The New England Puritans regarded their colony as both the Promised Land and the New Jerusalem and, unlike the European explorers who claimed the land in the names of European powers, they justified their colonization by constructing "America" as a symbol of redemptive promise. The builders of a "City upon a Hill," in John Winthrop's famous phrase, they portrayed themselves as the "covenanted saints" destined to regenerate salvation history.[8]

---

[8] In addition to the recent studies of Lee Quinby (Anti-Apocalypse [Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1994] and Millennial Seduction [Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1999]), James Berger (After the End [Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1999]), and Stephen O'Leary (Arguing the Apocalypse [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994]), there are many discussions of the significance of apocalyptic thought in American self-definition. Sacvan Bercovitch examines its Puritan roots in The American Jeremiad (Madison: U Wisconsin P, 1978) and its continued presence in canon formation in The Rites of Assent (New York and London: Routledge, 1993). Ruth Bloch (Visionary Republic [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985]) and Nathan O. Hatch (The Sacred Cause of Liberty [New Haven: Yale UP, 1977]) analyze the central role of a millennial tradition in Republican thought. Hatch describes this tradition as "civil millennialism" in "The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America: New England Clergymen, War with France, and the Revolution," William and Mary Quarterly 31 (1974): 407-30. Ernest Tuveson focuses on the apocalyptic character of Manifest Destiny and western expansion in the nineteenth century in Redeemer Nation (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1968), as does Richard Slotkin in The Fatal Environment (New York: Atheneum, 1985). Paul Boyer provides a study of prophecy belief in the twentieth century in When Time Shall be No More (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992); and in By the Bomb's Early Light (New York: Pantheon, 1985) and Fallout (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1998) he analyzes how nuclear technology revived millennial hopes and apocalyptic anxieties in the United States. On the latter subject, A.G. Mojtabai looks at how the residents of Amarillo, Texas, where all American nuclear weapons receive their final assembly, reconcile

While Puritan rhetoric had undermined the distinction between sacred and secular rhetoric, making the New Jerusalem both a spiritual state and a geographical place, Enlightenment ideas radically depersonalized the supernatural cast of providence into Nature and Necessity, allowing faith in the millennium to become faith in the perfectibility of human progress. Jonathan Edwards and, later, patriot leaders alike spoke in the evolving rhetoric of what Nathan O. Hatch terms America's "civil millennialism." The War of Independence marked the expansion of the dominant ideology from a colonial cultural narrative to a national and nationalist one that presented the new Republic as the place of unlimited secular possibility. The Revolution was in this frame both the end and a beginning. As Tom Paine wrote in 1776: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again" (53).

---

themselves to the possibility of a nuclear armageddon through apocalyptic beliefs (Blessed Assurance [Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1986]). Charles B. Strozier offers a psychological analysis of those beliefs in his study of American fundamentalism (Apocalypse [Boston: Beacon Press, 1994]). Of the many millenarian and utopian movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ruth Doan (The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture [Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1987]) and Krishnan Kumar (Utopianism [Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1991]) focus on their social and cultural contexts. Like Robert N. Bellah's analysis of the American "civil religion" in Beyond Belief (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), both Cushing Strout and Garry Wills emphasize the importance of political religion in the United States, the former in The New Heavens and New Earth (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) and the latter notably in Under God (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990). On the significance of the year 2000 and the dread of apocalyptic catastrophe and hope for millennial salvation associated with it, see Quinby's Millennial Seduction in which she argues that "the idea of the third millennium as an American national product is a matter of consumption" (18).

Apocalyptic thinking is seductive, according to Frank Kermode, because it helps to structure the ambiguity of human experience. Endings suggest beginnings, making the circumstantial meaningful. One way to understand the apocalyptic form of American self-definition is to recognize that it provides a narrative with a beginning and an end, as in the flight from Old World corruption to New World redemption, and the struggle against English tyranny to its completion in American democracy. As an ideological narrative, moreover, it orders the past, defines the present, and predicts the future. It replaces the contingencies of history with the certainties of History, and universalizes the latter.[9] Something similar is at

---

[9] Put differently, it naturalizes history. In his important study of the semiotics of ideology, Roland Barthes examines how ideology works to "forget" the "historical quality of things." Ideology "purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact" (Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers [London: Jonathan Cape, 1972], 142-43). Ideological narrative orders experience and encloses history by establishing "ends" in both meanings of the word. Terry Eagleton provides a lucid analysis of ideology, as well as a survey of the concept, in Ideology: An Introduction (London and New York: Verso, 1991); see also John B. Thompson, Studies in the Theory of Ideology (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984); Raymond Boudon, The Analysis of Ideology, trans. Malcolm Slater (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1989); and David Hawkes, Ideology (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). Göran Therborn discusses how ideology attempts to legislate desire by defining what is possible and impossible, thinkable and unthinkable, in The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology (London: Verso, 1980). Pierre Macherey suggests the narrativity of ideology in A Theory of Literary Production, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); and Hayden White is concerned with the structures of historical narratives and how our access to historical reality is necessarily mediated by "the content of the form," a process of narrative emplotment directed by ideological preferences. White's main works are Metahistory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973) and Tropics of Discourse (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), and their argument is distilled in the title essay of The Content of the Form (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987).

work in what Eric Santner describes as "narrative fetishization," a strategy of "simulating a condition of intactness" that erases the traumas of history or displaces them elsewhere (144). Apocalyptic narratives can therefore operate as a form of ideological repression, as James Berger argues. "The burden of maintaining a perfect history is too heavy for any culture," he writes. "And the insistent denial of the traumatic events of our history has brought about the need for these repeated apocalyptic purgings, both real and imaginary, as if this time we will finally get right what always was right, and somehow never was right" (135). In each variant of the apocalyptic narrative, History is once again begun so as finally to be done with it. But history always disrupts History. The Puritan errand into the wilderness encountered an alien Other both within and without. Slavery as well as native dispossession and later extermination complicated, to say the least, the clarity of the plot, while the social and political ferment brought on by industrialization and urbanization cast doubt on the identification of America with the millennial end of history.[10] Writing of slavery in Notes on the State of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson feared an apocalyptic end in violence:

> I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a

---

[10] See, for example, Strozier's discussion of how the Civil War and Lincoln's assassination were integrated into apocalyptic structures of history as attempts to reconstitute a threatened national identity. The consequences, he argues, remain acute: "what is the meaning today of having forged, but not discarded, the apocalyptic as the core experience of our nationality?" (181).

> revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest. (163)

If the dominant ideology cannot naturalize such contradictions to the unilinear progression of its narrative plot, it can repress them by forgetting or denying them, and thereby placing them "outside" history. This has meant, as Berger observes, an "explosive ideological coexistence" (134).

As suggested by the rupture of an anxious vision of imminent catastrophe in Jefferson's text, within the apocalyptic end of history are other possible ends that are almost--but not quite--unthinkable. No ideology is monolithic or monologic. Because it operates to provide social cohesion if not subjective coherence among a diversity of sometimes competing, sometimes conflicting, social identities and political groups, an ideology is internally complex and even contradictory. Thus the strength of an ideology to negotiate difference is also its potential weakness.[11] An ideology that prescribes what is and is not historically possible must

---

[11] This is the implication of Donna Haraway's revision of Louis Althusser's influential theory of ideological interpellation. Ideology, according to Althusser, is the very texture of reality; it provides the lived relations of the individual to the dominant relations of society. In other words, it produces the subject: "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects" writes Althusser ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in Lenin and Philosophy, trans. Ben Brewster [London: New Left Books, 1971], 162-63). Individuals not only live within a structure of ideological truisms, they identify those beliefs and assumptions with their own "authentic" subjectivity. Ideology is so constructed that any questions asked within it--questions about the future, for example--already contain their presupposed answers. But in this explanation, notes Haraway, ideology has a closed and even

accommodate, even if by negation or disavowal, different ends to the historical narrative, thereby allowing for the possibility of reading that master narrative "otherwise."

Beginning with the End

Until fairly recently, the apocalyptic elements in American literature have been either dismissed or disregarded, as Douglas Robinson notes (2-9). Critics as various as Leslie Fiedler, Robert Alter, Bernard Bergonzi, and R.W.B. Lewis have each discussed, and generally deplored, the continued fascination for American writers of images of the end. Against these attacks, Robinson argues that there exists in American literature a legitimate tradition of speculations on the end.[12] Expressions of what he terms "the apocalyptic

---

self-identical structure. Against Althusser's assumption that subjects always recognize themselves in an ideological hailing, she points out that subjects might sometimes misrecognize themselves: "Interpellation is double-edged in its potent capacity to hail subjects into existence. Subjects in a discourse can and do refigure its terms, content, and reach" (Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse [New York: Routledge, 1997], 50). Terry Eagleton makes a similar point when he notes that Althusser assumes that the subject is necessarily unified: "Someone may be a mother, Methodist, house-worker and trade unionist all at the same time, and there is no reason to assume that these various forms of insertion into ideology will be mutually harmonious." And the interpellative discourses themselves, he stresses, likewise "form no obvious cohesive unity" (145).

[12] Because his argument is situated on the battlefield of the canon wars, Robinson does not examine the "apocalyptic ideology" as ideology. His aim, instead, is to establish it as a central form of expression for nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers. The point here, however,

ideology" are not always or necessarily apologetic; they can also be oppositional. While negotiations of that ideology abound in American literature, postmodern fiction provides a notable opportunity to examine the ways in which the dominant ideology enables dissent even as it works to disable it. Literary postmodernism has received a number of definitions, but one feature those definitions generally agree on is an awareness of ideological embeddedness more prominent than in previous literary movements.[13] What makes postmodern fiction especially valuable to study is its consciousness that its strategies of resistance emerge not from an exterior perspective but from within the social and cultural context.

Written during Cold War and post-Cold War anxieties about American destiny, many postmodern texts confront the "millennial seduction," in Lee Quinby's words, of the dominant

---

is not just whether apocalypticism is or is not canonical, but why it should be so.

Other studies of American apocalyptic literature include John R. May, Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel (Notre Dame: U Notre Dame P, 1972); David Ketterer, New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1974); Lois Parkinson Zamora, ed., The Apocalyptic Vision in America (Bowling Green: Bowling Green U Popular P, 1984); Zbigniew Lewicki, The Bang and the Whimper: Apocalypse and Entropy in American Literature (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984); Joseph Dewey, In a Dark Time: The Apocalyptic Temper in the American Novel of the Nuclear Age (West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1990); and Peter Freese, From Apocalypse to Entropy and Beyond: The Second Law of Thermodynamics in Post-War American Fiction (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 1997). Each applies a thematic approach that generally overlooks the ideological importance of apocalypse in American fiction. Two authors who do examine the availability of apocalyptic structures to ideological formation are James Berger and Lee Quinby and whose ideas I will turn to below.

[13] See, for example, the contributions to Larry McCaffery's Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide. New York: Greenwood, 1986.

ideology. The novels selected for discussion in this dissertation engage with the ideological nature of apocalyptic history, indicating points of contradiction where the ideology seems less than total, less than homogeneous, and thereby open up a space in which social transformation is thinkable.[14] For, despite the dominant ideology's seeming totality in the postmodern condition, and despite the supposed obsolescence of historical thought, it is not a seamless unity. Historical thinking does continue in the responses of fiction to the end. Each novel is suspicious of an end that forecloses significant change, leaving open the possibility of another end, a utopian end. These texts, in other words, are exemplary of a utopian thinking that is

---

[14] A clarification of my principles of selection. While this dissertation aims to offer some conclusions about the end-of-history formulation in its contemporary cultural context, it does not aim at inclusiveness. There are certainly many American postmodern novels that portray the protagonist's collision with the historical consequences of sociopolitical forces. I have narrowed my scope to what I maintain are representative novels in which history is not (to oversimplify) a background against which characters enact their narrative trajectory. Rather, those chosen for discussion here emphasize the problems of historical thinking, placing "history" in the foreground as a contested object. I have selected novels that reveal an awareness that our understanding of history is through narrative, whether that narrative is prior texts or, more importantly, the discursive structure of ideology. The novels I focus on are crucial, I believe, because they foreground the "foregone conclusions" (in Bernstein's words) of apocalyptic history and examine, in exemplary ways, the problem of historical thinking within a dominant ideology that prescribes ways of conceiving the end of history. Each uses different narrative methods, but a shared point of entry is the question of the mastery of history: who claims to possess it and decide its direction and end. There is, moreover, a critical utopian element common to them, for each is aware of the desirability of the end and presents it as the goal of human agency--a goal that resides within history, each suggests, rather than at its end. The novels chosen here are not simply suspicious of the end as a conventional matter of dogmatic or arbitrary closure; rather, they present the end as an object of desire that requires us not simply to rethink history but also to acknowledge the role of human agency as an obligated participant in its potential and promised completion.

neither prescriptive nor dogmatic. Taken together, they perform something similar to what Michel Foucault defines as "to fiction": "to make fiction work within truth, to induce truth-effects within a fictional discourse, and in some way to make the discourse of truth arouse, 'fabricate' something which does not yet exist, thus 'fiction' something. One 'fictions' history starting from the political reality that renders it true, one 'fictions' a politics that doesn't yet exist starting from an historical truth" (74-75).

Foucault gestures toward another end of history, the "not yet" or "still not" of a utopian end that must always remain open and undefined. In order for an ideology to be effective, it must speak to utopian longings.[15] In a Lacanian theorization of ideology, Slavoj Žižek maintains that it is invested with desire. "The fundamental level of ideology," he writes, "is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself" (33). It is therefore incorrect to regard ideological fantasy as an entirely negative illusion. By promoting a prescribed meaning to history it works not just through anxiety but also through desire. As Žižek insists, ideology is not a matter of consciousness, of knowledge, false or otherwise. Instead, it is a matter of the unconscious and desire, which he maintains constitute subjectivity. This can therefore be the undoing of

---

[15] This is one of the key insights of the later Frankfurt School. See, for example, Ernst Bloch's Principle of Hope, which finds in the power of advertisements the appeal to utopian fantasies (trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986]), and Jameson's argument that the collective nature of all ideological formations are utopian (The Political Unconscious [London: Routledge, 1981], 286-99).

any ideology; for in trying to speak for common aspirations, it cannot completely contain them.

These tensions are most apparent in John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia Fire (1990), the subject of chapter 2. Focusing on the 1985 fire-bombing by city and state police of a Philadelphia house occupied by MOVE, an African-American "anti-social" collective, Philadelphia Fire aggressively criticizes the dominant ideology by examining the profound intolerance at the core of the founding ideals of America. The historical promise of a millennial site of sanctuary and historical redemption, in which the community participates in regeneration and the individual achieves a subjective wholeness and experiential completion, has always been denied African Americans, Wideman insists. Revealing how the definition of "America" is structurally exclusionary, moreover, the novel is also an expression of the ideological impasse presented by the apocalyptic rage to destroy the present fallen age in order to create a prelapsarian point of origin uncontaminated by history. For that desire, too, Philadelphia Fire recognizes, is subject to an ideological co-option: apocalyptic fury repeats the apocalyptic violence that first roused the outraged sense of justice. In its place, the novel seeks to recover the utopian impulses of the civil rights movement that have, by the 1980s, degenerated into a single concern for "MPT"--money, power, things. Acknowledging the dilemma of trying to stay "outside" the system while simultaneously trying to change it from within, Philadelphia Fire resists an exclusionary end of history and, at the same time, stresses the ethical responsibility of trying to achieve its utopian end.

Both E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime (1975) and Robert Coover's The Public Burning (1977), the subjects of chapter 3, examine the teleological plot that presents historical process as natural necessity. Resisting the ideological foreclosure at work in notions of historical inevitability, both novels emphasize the contingencies of history and the junctures at which events might have followed one course rather than another. Ragtime and The Public Burning reject the closed universe of apocalyptic history through a method that Michael André Bernstein calls "sideshadowing." In contrast to the foregone conclusions implicit in foreshadowing, sideshadowing stresses the haphazard and accidental in order to disrupt the triumphalism of the master plot of unilinear history. This emphasis of both novels on the excess of historical events is also characteristic of what Stephen O'Leary describes as "comic apocalypse." Unlike tragic apocalypse, which reduces the disorder of history to a monologic order of divine or natural necessity, comic apocalypse recognizes the contingent in history and thereby suggests an open horizon of possibility (87-89). The result in these two novels, however, is not a historical relativism but a radical skepticism. In their concentration on the accidental, neither Ragtime nor The Public Burning denies historical meaning. Rather, both novels generate an excess of historical trajectories to deflate the ideological force of an apocalyptic end of history. They offer counternarratives as a form of critical memory, uncovering what the master narrative would like to forget about the past and foreclose about the future. Each novel, moreover, is aware of the end as an object of desire and implicates the reader in reading for the end. There is thus a utopian element in Ragtime and The Public

Burning, an ethical awareness that the present might be different and the future more undecided than the dominant ideology allows. The end of history, they indicate, is the goal of human agency operating within history.

"Apocalypse," from the Greek word for uncovering or unveiling, is linked to revelation, and apocalyptic narrative has an affinity with conspiracy theory. As O'Leary notes, conspiracy thinking often appears within apocalyptic myth: the book of Revelation's narration of the end of the world, the locus classicus of apocalypse in Western culture, also describes the evil counterplot of Antichrist (6). Chapter 4 discusses how the paranoid suspicion of conspiracy that is confronted in William Burroughs's Cities of the Red Night (1981) and Thomas Pynchon's Vineland (1990) is another way of thinking about the end. Finding alternative histories within History, conspiracy theory reveals the endlessness of the end. It is an endless interpretive and narrative practice that works towards the end of history but also resists it. Moreover, in the context of the televisual culture of a techno-global information society, in which there is neither a stable consensus reality nor a transparent public sphere, it can be an oppositional practice that attempts to recover historical agency. For within conspiracy theory is a utopian impulse, according to Jameson, to undertake a "cognitive mapping" of the totality of social relations, a collective effort to relate local experience to global structures of power (Geopolitical Aesthetic 2-3). It "may be simplistic and wrong," writes Mark Fenster, but in its "attempt to insert the individual into history writ large . . . the conspiracy narrative needs to be recognized for what it is: a utopian desire to understand and

confront the contradictions and conflicts of contemporary capitalism" (116). But paranoia, Cities of the Red Night and Vineland recognize, can also be interpellative: far from being a pathological condition, it is often normative.[16] Paranoia inhabits the limits of an ideological horizon; it closes the fissures between an ideological construction and individual experience.[17]

---

[16] Although the political scientist Jodi Dean discusses "the paradox of the information age: that approach to political action which is most likely to enhance freedom contributes to the production of paranoia," she stresses how conspiracy theory "may well be an appropriate vehicle for political contestation" (Aliens in America [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998], 8, 23). Carl Freedman, on the other hand, maintains that paranoia is "the normative subjectivity of capitalist society": commodity fetishism relies on an incessant overinterpretation of surplus value while the operations of capital are simultaneously obvious and obscure in supposedly open political processes and rational economic structures ("Towards a Theory of Paranoia: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick," Science Fiction Studies 11 [1984]: 15). For a critique of the conventional understanding of conspiracy-paranoia as pathological and marginal, as well as a discussion of the competing claims about conspiracy theory's political value, see Mark Fenster's Conspiracy Theories (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1999).

[17] Paranoia can work to "make sense" of ideological dissonance. Žižek offers anti-Semitism, in which "the ideological figure of a Jew is a way to stitch up the inconsistency" of an ideology, as an illustration of this process. He presents the hypothetical situation of a German citizen in the late 1930s and his good neighbor Mr. Stern: in the evenings they have friendly chats and their children play together. How would the German, daily immersed in anti-Semitic propaganda, reconcile the ideological construction of the evil Jew to his everyday experience of his good neighbor? "His answer would be to turn this gap, this discrepancy itself, into an argument for anti-Semitism: 'You see how dangerous they really are? It is difficult to recognize their real nature. They hide it behind the mask of everyday appearance--and it is exactly this hiding of one's real nature, this duplicity, that is a basic feature of the Jewish nature'" (The Sublime Object of Ideology 48-49).

The point is not to dismiss conspiracy theory as entirely "ideological" or to repathologize paranoia. Instead, it is to question a too easy equation between paranoia and counterhegemonic practices. Thus, I think that Dean's valorization of conspiracy theory overlooks the crucial ideological function of what Fenster calls the "paranoia of everyday life" (61) when she writes: "Like newsstand tabloids and trash TV, the strange is part of our everyday world; indeed, so much a part of it that we don't try to bring it in. We don't try to

Although both novels enact paranoia, neither is merely symptomatic of conspiracy thinking. Rather, they provide an enactment of paranoia to expose the strategies of domination and control. In different ways, both demonstrate the posthistorical paralysis of the "enlightened false consciousness" analyzed by Peter Sloterdijk that "has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but . . . has not, and probably has not been able to, put them into practice" (5). Yet, refusing the cynical reasoning that accepts the end of history, both position a utopian moment not (or not just) in the future but in a past that can be remembered and, however provisionally, regenerated. Combined with that textual paranoia, furthermore, is a strategic nostalgia in both novels that aims to recover what triumphal history tries to disavow.

Chapter 5 turns to Don DeLillo's Underworld (1997), a novel written during the self-congratulation that greeted the end of the Cold War and the debates ignited by Fukuyama's end-of-history argument. Questioning the political cynicism of the posthistoric end that presents itself as hard-nosed realism, Underworld examines the production of weapons and waste as the end of postindustrial geopolitics. It asks if the endism embodied in the production of weapons and waste might be the sociopolitical logic of first, the Cold War, and second, American globalization. As a critical examination of the notion of the end of history,

---

fit the strange into something we can handle. We coexist with dissonance" (15). We coexist with dissonance precisely because we do try to bring strangeness in. We do try to fit the strange into something we can handle and we often do it through paranoid habits of interpretation. The hermeneutic of suspicion can provide a site of resistance; but--admittedly, to over-paranoid the paranoid--such a hermeneutic can also be a form of interpellation.

it rejects both the triumphalist view of a completed history in which significant social change is no longer necessary and the pessimist view of an exhausted history in which attempts at significant change are simply futile. Stressing that recycling, the conversion of waste into value, is one of the few remaining socially meaningful acts, Underworld wonders if in that action there is not a foreclosed end of history but a utopian promise of future possibility. Much of Fukuyama's argument rests upon the proposition that everybody, even the most vicious dictator, today speaks in a common language of democratic values, a proposition that presumes that every voice is equally heard. Underworld, however, emphasizes how the voices of the dumpster generally go unheard and finds in the polyphonic languages of graffiti and art produced from cast-offs counterhegemonic strategies protesting the foreclosure of history. As if taking its cue from Fukuyama's End of History, Underworld installs Hegel's understanding of history on its first page when it stresses there that desire is the engine of historical change. In the Hegelian end of history, contradiction--the fuel of history--achieves its final reconciliation. "Contradiction" is thus a privileged term in Underworld: throughout the novel it is acknowledged as providing the texture of experience, the meaning of history. Moreover, contradiction, the novel also insists, has not come to an end; instead, it accelerates, as in the widening local and global gap between the well-fed and the hungry, the healthy and the sick--contradictions that cannot be simply absolved by insisting that certain groups of people, like certain nations, remain "stuck" in history. Thus, even though the novel valorizes

contradiction, it also seeks to resolve it. Underworld ends by means of the techno-miraculous in which all contradiction is at once and seemingly magically erased in a single computer keystroke that conjures the utopian promise of the end of history. Underworld offers a simulation of the apocalyptic end, both catastrophic and beatific, that answers the call of the dominant ideology's millennial seduction by stressing what remains emphatically uncompleted at the supposed end of history.

A seemingly impossible utopian end of history remains the necessarily open-ended goal of these novels. Writing of the dilemma presented by posthistory, Andreas Huyssen asks:

> How can historical memory help us resist the spread of cynical amnesia that generates the simulacrum side of postmodern culture? How can we avoid paralysis, the feeling of history at a standstill that comes with Critical Theory's negative dialectic as much as with the positing of a carceral continuum that occupies central space in recent French accounts of posthistoire? (xiv)

The novels discussed in the following chapters work to disrupt that carceral continuum by undermining, in different ways, the dominant ideology's narrative of an apocalyptic end. Rather than seeking the final revelation of the truth, they offer a reevaluation of historical truths that cultural amnesia and political cynicism seek to disavow or disown. This does not mean a return to the past as an authorizing source for a regressive nostalgia or apologia. Rather, it means paying attention to the "uses" of the past, to the ways in which history has

been plotted, in order to find instances that speak to the present and, also, future: past moments of historical trauma that have been repressed as well as past glimpses of utopia that have been dismissed. In sum, these novels underscore the ethical necessity of a rejuvenated historical thinking that refuses the foreclosure of the end.

The brief concluding chapter considers whether these novels oblige us to reconsider closure and the end of history as a necessarily dogmatic or authoritarian response to the potential infinitude of history. Together they suggest the paradox of the end: both its desirability as an end to contradiction and its inability to stabilize a final resolution. Maybe closure--"the end"--is a necessary fiction. In his response to Fukuyama's triumphal "good news"(End xiii), Jacques Derrida stresses this paradox. Closure is always inadequate but there nonetheless remains what he insists is an "infinite responsibility" to imagine and think critically about the impossible end ("Remarks" 82). That responsibility is not only urged by the novels considered here but is continued as well by other recent works of American fiction whose engagement with the promise of history and its infinite potential suggests that posthistorical paralysis might not be a terminal condition.

Chapter Two:

Reconciliation, Closure, and the Recovery of History:

John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia Fire

John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia Fire challenges the end of history that forecloses significant change for African Americans by revealing how "race" is essential to the dominant ideology's narrative of the end. In that narrative, Wideman emphasizes, race simultaneously is and is not rendered significant. Like Cornel West, who diagnoses the obfuscations of an American discourse of globalization that speaks in a coded language of race while also proclaiming the obsolescence of that racist code, Wideman stresses the persistent structural necessity of a debased racial "other" in the self-definition of America in the last decades of the twentieth century.[1] Much of the project of Wideman's fiction is to keep alive in collective memory what triumphal history disavows. The Lynchers (1973) begins with a lengthy chronicle, from the eighteenth century to the present, that records the many injustices--notably

---

[1] The valorization of a postindustrial society going global, West writes, transforms the continuing effects of racism into merely local concerns, therefore subordinating them into aberrations from a dominant trajectory: "The global cultural bazaar of entertainment and enjoyment, the global shopping mall of advertising and marketing, the global workplace of blue-collar and white-collar employment, and the global financial network of computerized transactions and megacorporate mergers appear to render any talk about race irrelevant" (in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West, The Future of the Race [New York: Vintage, 1997], 107).

lynching--suffered by black people in the United States. The Cattle Killing (1996) also narrates the racism that subtends American history in its presentation of the yellow fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia in 1793. That particular episode is also the subject of the title story of Fever (1989). The urgency with which the life stories of individual African Americans are narrated in Reuben (1987), Two Cities (1998), and especially in the works that make up the Homewood trilogy--Damballah (1981), Hiding Place (1981), and Sent for You Yesterday (1983)--suggests that story-telling in Wideman's fiction is often a form of survival.

In its struggle to comprehend how and why the city administration of Philadelphia decided in 1985 to fire-bomb a row house occupied by members of an African American collective known as MOVE, Philadelphia Fire works to redefine the end of history when it stresses that narratives of history are constructed on norms not of inclusion but of exclusion. Those narratives, in other words, often rely on the structure of an apocalyptic history that omits its victims in order to establish the cohesiveness of its master plot. To reveal the exclusionary foundations of the nation's origins that still operate in cultural formations of "America" is to challenge the deceptively inclusive end of history promoted by the dominant ideology. By refusing that exclusionary narrative, moreover, Philadelphia Fire tries to establish an inclusive historical identity reconstructed through the narrative work of mourning.

When that defining Other of cultural identity is perceived as excessively incoherent it can threaten the stability of national identity; and that threat, as history has shown, is often met with apocalyptic violence. On 13 May 1985, by order of Mayor Wilson Goode, five

hundred heavily armed police first surrounded a MOVE house in West Philadelphia and, after a twelve-hour standoff, dropped a satchel of explosives onto the roof of the house. The fire killed eleven members of MOVE, including five children, and destroyed the predominantly black neighborhood of Osage Avenue. This catastrophe reflects the logic of what Lee Quinby describes as the double meaning of an "apocalyptic fit": both the power relations that prescribe the culture's standards of truth and the violence that erupts when conformity to that regime of truth is disrupted (Anti-Apocalypse xi). A "fringe group," MOVE refused to inhabit the fringe; its own regime of truth--its aggressive back-to-nature agenda uncontaminated by the norms of society--destabilized the larger one. In consequence, it was obliterated.

Philadelphia Fire refuses to let that disaster be similarly wiped from collective memory. The bombing of the house is an "unspeakable" moment around which and through which the novel tries to work:

> Chopper's over the house now . . . cop in a flak vest riding shotgun with a Uzi in his lap is the bombardier . . . checks the satchel of death . . . guides the pilot down closer, closer . . . rotors chuck chuck . . . he sees gasoline cans on the roof . . . closer closer . . . inside the house they hear it chuck chuck . . . just seconds now 10 . . . 9 . . . 8 pig grins and says this is gonna be something . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . Hit it! Fist . . . slams into his palm. No word. (197, Wideman's ellipses)

In stark contrast to the daily noise of its loudspeakers and the violence of its destruction, MOVE has come to occupy a place of silence in the cultural memory. As Margaret Jones, a fictionalized former member of MOVE, protests: "The whole city seen the flames, smelled the smoke, counted the body bags. Whole world knows children murdered here. But it's quiet as a grave, ain't it? Not a mumbling word" (19). The silences and absences of historical narrative are the focus of Philadelphia Fire. In the aftermath of the fire, the neighborhood was bulldozed and then rebuilt, suggesting a site of repressed historical trauma.[2] Repeatedly returning to that erased scar on the Philadelphia landscape, the novel examines other scars of American history, trying to recover what its narrative constructions have repressed.

Central to Philadelphia Fire's examination of the violent confrontation between MOVE and the city of Philadelphia are the questions: what is America? And who constitutes it? The history of MOVE reveals just how charged those questions can be.[3] Founded in the early

---

[2] Mayor Wilson Goode revealed one motive for this strategic amnesia when, in interviews with the press, he refused to dwell on the MOVE disaster because it was not good for the city's image. Business trends were up, he liked to note, as was construction (John Anderson and Hilary Hevenor, Burning Down the House: MOVE and the Tragedy of Philadelphia [New York and London: Norton, 1987], 388-89).

[3] Before the confrontation, the following statement was prepared for Police Commissioner Gregor Sambor to address to the occupants of the MOVE house: "This is the Police Commissioner. We have warrants for the arrest of Frank James Africa, Ramona Johnson Africa, Theresa Brooks Africa, and Conrad Hampton Africa for various violations of the criminal statutes of Pennsylvania. We do not wish to harm anyone. All occupants have 15 minutes to peaceably evacuate the premises and surrender. This is your only notice. The 15 minutes start now." However, when he did deliver the prepared statement through a bullhorn on the morning of May 13, Sambor began: "Attention MOVE, this is America" (Philadelphia

1970s, MOVE began as a collective of African Americans that rejected what it called "the system."[4] From its inception, however, MOVE was always difficult to define with precision. This was due in part to the group's agenda of multiple issues: black nationalism, animal rights, a vegetarianism that allowed only fruit and raw vegetables, and an antitechnology philosophy that scorned norms of dress and hygiene--all issues that were sometimes contradictory (Cleaver 151). But this opacity was also due to MOVE's self-conscious refusal to be easily categorized: the members of MOVE took pride, for example, in the fact that the group's name means nothing. By the 1980s, MOVE was a counterculture self-consciously living within the society it spurned and, beginning in 1984, it erected an outdoor loudspeaker system on its Osage Avenue house from which it harangued the police, the government, and later individual neighbors with obscenities for as long as six to eight hours each day. This daily barrage of personal attacks on neighbors and threats to public officials was, according to a MOVE self-published document, a "strategized profanity to expose the profane circumstances of the system's injustice" (qtd. in Wagner-Pacifici 14). MOVE embodied what the culture has

---

Inquirer 18 May 1985: A8).

[4] For a history of MOVE, the bombing of the Osage Avenue house, and the aftermath, see Anderson and Hevenor, Burning Down the House.

repressed. Its purposely obnoxious practices were aimed at challenging definitions of the normal, the acceptable, and, not least, the thinkable.[5]

An editorial in the Philadelphia Inquirer published on 14 May 1985, the day after the bombing of the MOVE house, assumed these definitions to be self-evident when it remarked: "Under normal conditions it would have been unthinkable to mobilize such massive force to evict occupants from a house, but there is nothing normal about MOVE." But what is normal, MOVE implicitly and even explicitly asked. And what, moreover, is thinkable or unthinkable? The dirt, the smell, the noisy obscenities represented not merely a social nuisance; together they became the "filth" that any cultural system tries both to contain and deny. In her discourse analysis of the transcripts of the official inquiry into the disaster and its final report, Robin Wagner-Pacifici stresses that MOVE came to "represent the intolerable inchoate, the unknowable." All societies, she writes, "have a form of terror at the inchoate, the unknowable. Some call them demons, some witches, and some--ours--terrorists" (148). What "haunts" representations of MOVE by the city administration, the neighbors on Osage, the mass media, and the general public in Philadelphia and elsewhere, she emphasizes, is the fundamental question: just what is MOVE? (21-22). Was MOVE a romantic back-to-nature

---

[5] The report of the Special Investigation Commission charged to investigate the MOVE disaster stresses precisely this aspect of the group: "John Africa and his followers in the 1980s came to reject and to place themselves above the laws, customs, and social contracts of society. They threatened violence to anyone who would attempt to enforce normal societal rules" (The Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations of the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, 6 March 1986: 11).

commune? a radical black nationalist group? a religious cult? a revolutionary collective? or, as the city administration of Philadelphia finally decided, an armed and dangerous group of urban terrorists?

As Wagner-Pacifici's study makes clear, MOVE always represented a dangerous site of the indecipherable, generating a series of contradictions that could not be assimilated into a master narrative of cause and effect--as in, for instance, the report of the MOVE commission. The official inquiry of the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission could not precisely define MOVE, nor could it define the status of the children living in the MOVE house (were they "innocent" and "normal" children who were hostages to the MOVE adults? or were they decoy hostages and guerilla fighters-in-training?). Even the status of the eleven charred corpses retrieved from the Osage Avenue house proved undecidable. The Philadelphia Medical Examiner's Office classified all eleven deaths as accidental, but a forensic pathologist testifying to the MOVE commission rejected such a definition. He classified the deaths of the five children as homicide, not accident; but, in rejecting the determination of accidental death for the six adults, he could not provide a legal classification of their deaths as either suicide or homicide (Wagner-Pacifici 106). MOVE itself sought to destabilize definitions of the properly political, and the gaps and inconsistencies of the MOVE commission's report reproduce, in many ways, the resistance of MOVE to stable definition. Emphasizing how the excess represented by MOVE and the Osage Avenue confrontation could not be contained within the processes of social and political normalization, Susan Wells

writes: "The report [of the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission] reproduces the resistance of the MOVE catastrophe to being known, normalized, or reduced to an official story" (212).

Narrative Exclusions

Philadelphia Fire addresses the gaps and silences of historical narrative by specifically questioning the adequacy of the official record to represent the truth of what happened on 13 May 1985 in West Philadelphia. The complex textual strategies of Philadelphia Fire share many characteristics with what Linda Hutcheon identifies as historiographic metafiction: self-reflexive fictions that examine historical representation ("The Pastime of Past Time"). In its conflation of genres, the novel emphasizes their normative boundaries in order to challenge the claim of realist narrative--fictional and historical--to an adequate representation of the truth. The novel asks whose story is regarded as a reliable account; whose history survives in both public documents and private memory; and whose determination of the truth becomes the official record. The reality of past events, Philadelphia Fire indicates, is more ambiguous than unitary, closed, and evolutionary (or devolutionary) narratives generally allow. Margaret Jones labels the media stories about MOVE as "Bullshit": "Newspapers said King brainwashing and mind control and drugs and kidnapping people turn them to zombies" (15).

Unable to define MOVE, the press reports turn to sensationalism when they caricature the group as deviants.[6] In direct contrast to lurid accounts is the dispassionate language of an objective report that opens the historical section of the novel in Part Two. The facts are presented as speaking for themselves:

> On May 13, 1985, in West Philadelphia, after bullets, water canon and high explosives had failed to dislodge the occupants of 6221 Osage Avenue, a bomb was dropped from a state police helicopter and exploded atop the besieged row house. In the ensuing fire fifty-three houses were destroyed, 262 people left homeless. The occupants of the row house on Osage were said to be members of an organization called MOVE. Eleven of them, six adults and five children, were killed in the assault that commenced when they refused to obey a police order to leave their home. A grand jury subsequently

---

[6] The Philadelphia Inquirer and the Philadelphia Magazine struggled to understand MOVE by interviewing former members and current members living in other houses as well as the families of the dead: see, for example, Craig R. McCoy, "Who Was John Africa?" Philadelphia Inquirer Sunday Magazine 12 Jan. 1986: 18-23. But few national weeklies wasted little effort to describe the group. Newsweek provided a brief summary of MOVE's history that only rendered the group inexplicable (Tom Morganthau, "The Mysteries of MOVE" Newsweek 27 May 1985: 25); and Time simply labelled MOVE "a bizarre radical cult" (Frank Trippett, "It Looks Just Like a War Zone" Time 27 May 1985: 16). Both Time and Newsweek did, however, describe in detail the ordinariness of the predominantly black neighborhood of Osage Avenue, stressing its orderliness. Wagner-Pacifici notes a similar overemphasis on ordinariness by individual residents of the neighborhood in their testimony to the MOVE commission and wonders if they felt compelled to underscore their normalcy "because the dominant culture has trouble reading ordinary and African American together?" (74).

> determined that no criminal charges should be brought against the public officials who planned and perpetrated the assault. (97)

This narrative is as lacking in explanation as the newspaper reports; it too is limited by its chosen language which, instead of transparently representing historical reality, closes as many perspectives as its opens: the members of MOVE are reduced to mere numbers. The reality of the past cannot be reconciled into a simple truth, as Cudjoe realizes when he tries to understand King, the fictional MOVE's leader: "Her master's face a mask of masks. No matter how many you peel, another rises, like the skins of water. Loving him is like trying to solve a riddle whose answer is yes and no. No or yes. You will always be right and wrong" (15).

Philadelphia Fire rejects claims to a neutral presentation of past events when it suggests that narratives create their own truths. In its interplay of multiple narrative voices--those of Cudjoe, Margaret Jones, Timbo, J.B., the Vats gang-member, Simba Muntu, Richard Corey, and the narrator, as well as the autobiographical voice of Wideman himself--it reveals a concern for the multiplicity of truth. Not only does each character have a story to tell, each story is told in a specific idiom: their fictional histories emphasize that historical narratives are distinguished by their forms, forms that both include what seems appropriate to them and exclude what does not. As Brian McHale observes: "Different languages, different registers of the same language, different discourses each construct the world differently; in effect, they each construct different worlds" (Constructing Postmodernism 153).

Thus Simba's recollection of the fire, limited to simple statements in the present tense, can assign neither cause nor motive to the bombing: "The house is burning. My mama pushes me. Roof falling in. Bombs. Bombs. Do do do do do. She screams. Children coming out. Tito's skin like tree skin. Tito bursting open" (51-52). On the border of every narrative are other suppressed narratives. Trying to locate the lost boy, Cudjoe wonders: "Maybe this is a detective story."

> Out there the fabled city of hard knocks and exciting possibilities. You could get wasted out there and lots did. His job sleaze control. Bright lights, beautiful people, intrigue, romance. The city couldn't offer those rushes without toilets, sewers, head busters and garbage dumps. Needed folks on the other side of the fast track and needed a tough cookie to keep them scared and keep them where they belong. The fast movers would pay well for that service. Let you sample the goodies once in a while. Just enough to spoil you. Not enough to dull the edge you required to do their spadework, to get down where it was down and dirty. (46)

In the politics of representation, as Hutcheon argues, generic boundaries, the borders that define a narrative, are often analogous to social lines (Postmodernism 115)--here the "color bar." Wideman questions the notion of a fixed reality upon which conventional detective fiction is predicated: just as the reality of the "exclusive" world is constructed by the labor of

the excluded, so too is the truth of any narrative constructed not only by what it includes but also by what it excludes.

This challenge to the adequacy of representation does not result in historical relativism, however. Cudjoe wants to write a book about the MOVE fire, a historical study that would trace its development in a cause-and-effect narrative unfolding the truth: "What caused it. Who was responsible. What it means." Margaret Jones, however, scorns this project; the truth is not to be produced in texts, but experienced in the reality of the streets: "Don't need a book. Anybody wants to know what it means, bring them through here. Tell them these bombed streets used to be full of people's homes. Tell them babies' bones mixed up in this ash they smell" (19). And when studies of MOVE are written, she adds, they remain ignored: "Just like the social workers and those busybodies from the University. They been studying us for years. Reports on top of reports. A whole basement full of files in the building where I work. We're famous" (20). Margaret Jones suspects that representations of MOVE, whether Cudjoe's history or the academic studies, will only repeat the exclusions of African American experience.

Historical Exclusions

The crucial insight of Philadelphia Fire is that the representation of America as the site of history's terminus is a narrative constructed against those it has historically excluded; it is an America "backgrounded by savagery," in Toni Morrison's phrase (Playing in the Dark 44). The equation of the New World with the New Eden, an image central to the dominant ideology, is offered with rich irony in the novel's epigraph: "Let every house be placed, if the Person pleases, in the middle of its platt . . . so there may be ground on each side, for Gardens or Orchards or feilds, that it may be a greene Country Towne, wch will never be burnt, and always be wholsome." These words from William Penn signal Wideman's concern to emphasize how the principles of tolerance and egalitarianism associated with the novel's setting are in bleak contrast to the racism and intolerance that oppress its characters. Philadelphia is most famously the site of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. But Independence Square, as Cudjoe recalls, was also the site of a mob attack on black residents of the City of Brotherly Love "who'd been drawn by the Quaker promise of tolerance" and were "out in force to celebrate the nation's liberation from British tyranny" at a Fourth of July celebration in 1805 (190). And it is also in Independence Square that another viciously racist crime occurs when J.B. is set on fire.

Wideman evokes the democratic principles derived from the Enlightenment faith in the perfectibility of human society when Cudjoe's panoramic view of Philadelphia becomes a vision of the utopian city:

> He is sighting down a line of lighted fountains that guide his eye to City Hall. This is how the city was meant to be viewed. Broad avenues bright spokes of a wheel radiating from a glowing center. No buildings higher than Billy Penn's hat atop City Hall. Scale and pattern fixed forever. Clarity, balance, a perfect understanding between the parts. . . . If you could climb high enough, higher than the hill on which the museum perches, would you believe in the magic pinwheel of lights, straight lines, exact proportions, symmetry of spheres within spheres, gears meshing, turning, spinning to the perpetual music of their motion? Cudjoe fine-tunes for a moment the possibility that someone, somehow, had conceived the city that way. A miraculous design. A prodigy that was comprehensible. (44)

But "clarity, balance, a perfect understanding between the parts" remain unfulfilled principles because these ideals of civilized reason and harmony were defined against those excluded from human society. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has shown, racism was not an unfortunate attitude only incidental to Enlightenment philosophy. The ideal of a rational and historically perfectible society was defined <u>against</u> the supposed irrational savagery of blacks--those

"outside" history.[7] Thus racism was not an unhappy consequence or side-effect of colonization and expansion, as the historian Nathan Huggins argues in his critical reinterpretation of American history, nor was slavery "aberrant and marginal to the main story of American history" (xxxiii). Instead, the exclusionary principles of racism can be understood as structuring that master narrative. "We should not be surprised that the Enlightenment could accommodate slavery," observes Toni Morrison; "we should be surprised if it had not. The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom--if it did not in fact create it--like slavery" (Playing in the Dark 38).

It follows, then, that Cudjoe's panoramic vision of the utopian city should soon dissolve into the apocalyptic nightmare of the MOVE conflagration. The traumas of history return. Wideman emphasizes that the MOVE disaster was not an isolated incident, but one in a series of catastrophes, when he likens the fate of ghetto children to that of the original ghetto-dwellers, European Jews, evoking both meanings of the word "holocaust":

> Piles of shoes, a mountain of discarded clothes. A shower bath on the museum steps.

---

[7] Gates argues that race was a strategic category of definition. David Hume, for example, equated whiteness with civilization, and for Immanuel Kant, the words "black" and "stupid" were synonymous. Hegel believed there were no sub-Saharan civilizations because African cultures were oral rather than literate; they therefore had no history ("Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," Critical Inquiry 12 [Autumn 1985]: 10-11; see also Barbara Foley, Telling the Truth [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986], 238-40).

> Then smoke rising in the west. The city cringes and holds its nose and points a finger. Nothing is lost. In the blink of an eye a new crop playing on the steps, in the fountains flowing down the hill when summer days turn long and hot again.
>
> He's imagined more than he wanted to. The boy. The girl. The fire consuming their few belongings. All the evidence up in smoke. No warehouses of shoes and eyeglasses and clothing left behind to convict the guilty. The dead were dead. What they possessed gone with them. On Osage Avenue bulldozers and cranes comb the ashes, sift, crush, spread them neat as a carpet over vacant lots. (48)

In this description of apocalyptic catastrophe and its aftermath, Wideman stresses not just loss but also how even its aftermath can be rendered invisible, suggesting the process of cultural amnesia. James Berger links the idea of apocalypse to the psychoanalytic concept of trauma and argues that representations of the post-apocalypse--what comes after the end--can be "simultaneously symptoms of historical traumas and attempts to work through them" (19). Interpreting cultural representations of the end through both Freud's theorizations of how a traumatic event is repressed and yet returns in somatic form or compulsive repetition and Slavoj Žižek's argument that trauma is the irruption of the Lacanian Real into the symbolic (marking a gap or rupture that also structures the symbolic order), Berger shows how the ways in which historical traumas have been assimilated in cultural memory are crucial to the

present posthistorical impasse. The contemporary blockage of historical thinking can be understood as symptomatic of a cultural inability to mourn--to "work through"--past catastrophes. Narrative is potentially a form of mystification: the narrativization of past traumas can be a form of disavowal as in, for example, the narrative fetishization discussed by Eric Santner that acknowledges loss but displaces its origins; it can be a form of repression, as in the master narrative of American History challenged by Philadelphia Fire that denies the centrality of African Americans to that story. But narrative, Berger maintains, also has therapeutic value to a culture's self-definition. The narration of historical disasters, wounds to the social body, can also be the recovery of past traumas, thereby helping to disrupt the cultural amnesia fostered by the many and often conflicting narratives of the dominant ideology. This latter form of the work of mourning, allowing for the reconstitution of a traumatized cultural identity, is a process that Wideman is intent on.

The Recovery of History

In Freud's formulations, traumas are those events intolerable to consciousness because of the anxieties they create. Trauma threatens a disintegration of the ego, a breakdown of

identity.[8] MOVE and its destruction were threatening to cultural identity in a twofold manner. First, its continued emphatic presence was clearly an affront to the city in which it lived. MOVE's "filth" represented what the symbolic order aims to suppress; it was, in Žižek's understanding of trauma, the disruption of that order by excess, by what resists symbolization. Second, the city's response to MOVE--military and commercial explosives, sharpshooter rifles, shotguns, machine guns, UZIs, and an antitank weapon--was an excess that also threatened cultural identity. Philadelphia Fire refuses to allow this violent catastrophe and the prior traumas it repeats to remain forgotten in the collective memory.

In its narrative of the aftermath of the MOVE disaster, Philadelphia Fire presents another trauma; but in this instance it is an apocalyptic event before history, one that inaugurates the beginning of history and the beginning of narrative. In the tradition of black reinterpretations of The Tempest, Wideman revises the play to privilege the voice of Caliban. Before the arrival of Prospero, Caliban exists in the Edenic space of the pre-symbolic, a space of plenitude and presence:

> Your untouched island. Days and days. Food hangs on trees, grows on bushes, sprouts from the earth. Best fresh water in the world gushes cool from an underground cavern. You can't be lonely because you know nothing

---

[8] Freud's theorization of trauma appears in Studies on Hysteria, (The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey,.[London: Hogarth, 1955], 2), Beyond the Pleasure Principle (S.E. 18: 7-64) and Moses and Monotheism (S.E. 23: 7-137).

> but yourself. You are like the island. To prosper you don't need another island beside you. You are complete. Time is yesterday never ending, returning again and again. As always. Your future is each season recycling. What has been, once more. (146-47)

Prospero's arrival, however, precipitates Caliban's fall into language and history, subjectivity and subjection: "this struggling thing whatever it is zigging and zagging toward your island . . . weaving closer, closer, bearing down on you, you realize that coming at you is also perhaps coming for you and the nagging question you never quite put into words crystallizes, flashes clear as this slash of whiteness against blue sky" (147). Both subjected to Prospero as a slave and interpellatively subjected by the language Prospero teaches him, Caliban asks himself the postlapsarian question: "where did I come from?" (148). This is clearly a representation of an original trauma from which others follow in a complex series of symbolic formations and reformations. It describes the originary loss, gap, or "impossible kernel," in Žižek's words, that "resists symbolization, totalization, symbolic integration." This fundamental trauma structures the symbolic order, he continues, for every "attempt at symbolization-totalization comes afterwards: it is an attempt to suture an original cleft--an attempt which is, in the last resort, by definition doomed to failure" (6). Ideology works to provide a social reality that "makes sense" of that gap; but, as Žižek stresses, it always comes afterwards. The repeated intrusions of trauma--as loss, lack, or contradiction--reveal its

inadequacies. A recovery in narrative of what a symbolic integration has tried to forget can therefore destabilize the dominant historical narratives.

Coming after the originary trauma, a post-apocalyptic narrative is potentially disruptive of master narratives. The slave's language of subjectivity and subjection, taught to him by the master, can be double-edged. In The Tempest Prospero addresses Caliban as "Filth" (1.2.349); but Caliban's response, like MOVE's, is a refusal to remain the suppressed Other of the symbolic system: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is I know how to curse" (1.2.366-67). As Caliban knows, Prospero's power comes from his books. To seize them is to disempower the master and to return Caliban to his pre-apocalyptic state of wholeness.

Caliban's utopia of a pre-symbolic, pre-traumatic state might be a necessary fiction: it represents a sense of self-identity or continuity towards which Philadelphia Fire works. No original trauma can be wholly recovered, but it can be inferred through its traces. Thus the images of dystopia that figure prominently in Philadelphia Fire, such as the concentration camps planned by Kaliban's Kiddie Korps, are "aftermaths" that, as suggested in the name of this new KKK, point to prior catastrophes. The MOVE conflagration, the 1805 mob attack on black Philadelphians, the twenty million slaves whose blood is "mixed into the cement of [the nation's] foundations" (172) are past unresolved traumas whose damage continues in the present. Noting a similar sense of an "intangible Paradise already lost" in Wideman's earlier novels and stories, Jacqueline Berben observes that the settings of his fiction are often what

she terms either a Promised Land or a Waste Land (269). Even in urban landscapes Wideman's characters typically reenact and reinterpret the founding myth of settlement, she writes, "carving a city from the wilderness" and thereby partaking of "that pride which confers a sense of community identity" (260). In Philadelphia Fire, however, that foundational myth is rendered inadequate and the continuity of identity is destroyed by the continued presence of past disavowed traumas whose "ghosts" are always present (190). Cudjoe experiences Philadelphia as a historic site of failed promises, repeated disasters, and disintegration: "Centuries out of kilter, askew, but no one understanding the problem. Just this queasiness, this uneasiness. The tilt and slow falling. You are in a city" (43).

Wideman's emphatic insertion of The Tempest into the novel, a rupture of a past text into the present one, serves to mark this sense of trauma. It is "the central event," according to Wideman, that repeats another event, the originary trauma, that the novel is always compelled to return to, just as it repeatedly returns to the MOVE catastrophe:

> I assure you. I repeat. Whatever my assurance is worth. Being the fabulator. This is the central event, this production of The Tempest staged by Cudjoe in the late 1960s, outdoors, in a park in West Philly. Though it comes here, wandering like a Flying Dutchman in and out of the narrative, many places at once, The Tempest sits dead center, the storm in the eye of the storm, figure within a figure, play within a play, it is the bounty and hub of all else written

> about the fire, though it comes here, where it is, nearer the end than the beginning. (132)

Narrating that originary trauma through the revisionary voice of Caliban is a way of foregrounding what has been repressed. Observing that time is the "second meaning cached in the drama's title," Wideman writes that "this narrative," Philadelphia Fire, "what it's about is stopping time, catching time" (133). Recovering what has been lost in the past is one way to restore the future. It is, in other words, a means of resisting the foreclosure of the end of history that precludes the possibility of meaningful change.

A central concern of The Tempest is reconciliation: between brothers, between father and son, between exile and origin--oppositions that are repeated throughout Philadelphia Fire. The reconciliation of history, of the past to the present, and of the present to the future, can be understood as the central project of Philadelphia Fire, as it is in Wideman's other texts, such as the fictional Homewood Trilogy (1985) and the nonfictional Brothers and Keepers (1984) and Fatheralong (1994)--the latter two written to overcome family separations and splits.

Wideman stresses that the illusory wholeness represented by Caliban's utopian island cannot be recaptured in an impossible escape from history. The real-life MOVE tried to accomplish this, as well as the fictional Cudjoe. After trying to forget his past by leaving Philadelphia for the island of Mykonos where he hoped to be born again "before born again was big business" (86), Cudjoe returns to the city, the place of past losses, to repair his sense

of discontinuity. Separated from a white wife and their two children, a separation he regards as a double betrayal, Cudjoe sees himself as a "half-black someone, a half man" (10). Yet he understands that rift to be both an individual and a historical loss. Cudjoe tries to locate Simba Muntu, a fictional representation of the survivor Birdie Africa, because a recovery of the lost boy and his fractured narrative of the MOVE catastrophe is also a symbolic recovery of his own absent sons and his lost sense of identity:

> The boy who is the only survivor of the holocaust on Osage Avenue, the child who is brother, son, a lost limb haunting him since he read about the fire in a magazine. He must find the child to be whole again. Cudjoe can't account for the force drawing him to the story nor why he indulges a fantasy of identification with the boy who escaped the massacre. He knows he must find him. He knows the ache of absence, the phantom presence of pain that tricks him into reaching down again and again to stroke the emptiness. (7-8)

In order to understand and expiate his sense of guilt--in order to comprehend the phantom presence of an absent limb that is not absent--Cudjoe wants to write a book about the Osage Avenue disaster.

He "decides he will think of himself as a reporter covering a story in a foreign country." Yet Cudjoe is in a double-bind. He is embedded in the narrative of "America," the "movie [that] has been running for years, long before he was born" (45). Cudjoe, in other words, is caught in the dilemma of the African American intellectual: like Caliban, whose

subjectivity is also his subjection, he lives and writes in the discursive structures of the dominant culture.

Directly before the description of Cudjoe's decision to think of himself as a foreign correspondent quoted above, Wideman invokes the founders of the Republic: "Buried in their wigs, waistcoats, swallowtail coats, silk hose clinging to their plump calves. A foolish old man flying a kite in a storm" (45). The reference to Benjamin Franklin, whose canonical autobiography presents the continuity of its subject as exemplary of American identity, is a reminder that discontinuity is the story of African American subjectivity. In his biography of Wideman, James Robert Saunders places him in the tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois's revisionary historicism. In The Souls of Black Folk Du Bois defined black experience as a form of double-consciousness: "One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (364). The bar between the binarism "American/Negro" produces a debilitating dividedness that Cudjoe regards as his predicament: "he will explain to Margaret Jones that he must always write about many places at once. No choice. The splitting apart is inevitable" (23). Wideman emphasizes the concrete reality of this dilemma through an identification between Cudjoe's situation and his own when, in the autobiographical section strategically positioned at the center of the novel, he invites an equation between author and character. He asks: "Why this Cudjoe, then? This airy other floating into the shape of my story. Why am I him when I tell certain parts? Why am I hiding from myself? Is he mirror or black hole?" (122).

Wideman, too, seeks reconciliation and continuity with another lost child, his incarcerated son Jacob. The autobiographical section of Part Two is one attempt to overcome the physical and mental void between him and his son serving a life-sentence for murder:

> Say the word father. Now say son. Now think of the space between father and son, as they are words, as they are indications of time and the possibility of salvation, redemption, continuity. Think of these two words in natural order and sequence. One comes before the other, always, forever. And yet both must start somewhere, in order to begin one must break in, say one or the other, father or son, to begin. The mystery of their connection is that either word will do. I am the son of my father. I am father of my son. Son's father. Father's son. An interchangeability that is also dependence: the loss of one is loss of both. I breathe into the space separating me from my son. I hope the silence will be filled for him as it is filled for me by hearing the nothing there is to say at this moment. (103)

Wideman associates his son with Caliban, possibly in response to the accusation made by the parents of Jacob Wideman's victim that he had created a "monster" (Bray 7-8), when, after his meditation on the fragile continuity between fathers and sons, he cites The Tempest: "This thing of darkness / I acknowledge mine" (105). Wideman fears that Jacob is schizophrenic,

unable to maintain "an integrated sense of self, of oneness" (110). Jacob must struggle "at constructing an identity, an ego, a life":

> He must learn in periods of calm to repeat a story endlessly to himself: there is a good boy, someone who loves and is loved, who can fend off the devils, who can survive in spite of shifting, unstable combinations of good and evil, being and nothingness. Can this story he must never stop singing become a substitute for an integrated sense of self, of oneness, the personality he can never achieve? The son's father. Father's son. (110)

Jacob's schizophrenia, moreover, is implicitly likened to a larger damaged condition examined by Philadelphia Fire. On the one hand is MOVE, which aimed at the impossible when it tried to remain outside "the system" and outside history; on the other hand is Cudjoe's former friend Timbo, the cynic who has rejected his past in the civil rights movement and who is now part of the same city administration responsible for the MOVE confrontation. Like Mayor Wilson Goode, for whom he works, Timbo is "doing his jig inside the system. He ain't about change" (80). Timbo assumes the impossibility of historical change when he tells Cudjoe: "You and me. We happened to come along at a time when it seemed things might change. We thought we was big and bad enough to make the world different. That's our problem, believing things spozed to change for the better" (80).

In the autobiographical section of Philadelphia Fire, Wideman fears that the stories he must endlessly repeat to construct a narrative of an intact identity are, like his son's, doomed

to fail. Yet Du Bois's famous definition of African American subjectivity as a double-consciousness is also a challenge, according to Priscilla Wald, to convert the inner dividedness into an empowering ability to interpret the dominant culture "otherwise" (176). Philadelphia Fire works to reconstitute a traumatized African American identity by taking up that challenge. In his outrage at the MOVE fire, Cudjoe at one point during his contemplation of the Philadelphia landscape wonders if an apocalyptic end is inevitable:

> He can blot out great chunks of city by positioning his hand in front of his eyes. With his hands over his ears he can quiet sirens, the babble of traffic. Maybe he's missed the city. Or maybe he's home to remind himself how much he hates the whole stinking mess, the funky air, the slow belly rub of everybody's nerves till some poor soul can't take it and lights a match and burns the gig down around his head. (49)

But, aware of both the glamour and danger of apocalyptic thinking, as his earlier novel The Lynchers makes clear, Wideman rejects that conclusion. An apocalyptic end of history only reproduces the apocalyptic violence repeated throughout black history.[9] Instead, Philadelphia Fire presents a narrative work of mourning, an attempt to work through the traumas of

---

[9] In The Lynchers Wideman portrays the frustrations and resentment of the four protagonists with sympathy. But Littleman's plan to counter apocalyptic history with apocalyptic violence is presented as futile: "With the Man's million eyes and ears, the images of now they bombard us with, they have forced us to lose a sense of before and after, mistake their programmed version of our present lives for history, inevitability. Only a violent reversal will do" (183).

history and the guilt, fear, and anxiety generated by those disasters, in order to reformulate and reconstitute both individual and collective identity.

The collective form of mourning, Philadelphia Fire indicates, has yet to occur in the contemporary United States. Past traumas remain unresolved. Despite two grand jury investigations, no criminal indictments for the MOVE catastrophe were issued to any member of the Philadelphia city administration. The final report of the MOVE commission was also inconclusive; in some ways, it can be regarded as similar to the narrative fetishization described by Santner in that it represents an attempt to exorcize from the social body the violence and destruction historically done to real African American bodies.[10] At the end of Philadelphia Fire Cudjoe attends a memorial service for the dead of Osage Avenue and wonders: "Why wasn't the entire city mourning? Where was the mayor and his official delegation from City Hall? The governor? The president? A dog hit by a bus would draw

---

[10] Both Susan Wells and Robin Wagner-Pacifici emphasize how the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission was a reparative mechanism that attempted to mend the ruptures in the social fabric caused by the violence of the MOVE confrontation. The commission's report, both conclude, was inadequate at resolving the contradictions generated by MOVE and by the city administration's apparent inability to find a solution to the problems on Osage Avenue that did not involve force. In her analysis of the transcripts of the commission's official hearings, as well as the documents produced by the city of Philadelphia at the inquiry, Wagner-Pacifici describes competing narratives of class and race intersected at various points by the contradictory discourses of bureaucracy and domesticity, the law and the military, that often resulted in resonant moments of confused silence or defensive repetition--discursive breakdown, in other words.

a bigger crowd" (195). The site of the service is Independence Square, and Cudjoe "populates it with [the] ghosts" of the 1805 mob (190).

> Cudjoe hears footsteps behind him. A mob howling his name. Screaming for blood. Words come to him, cool him, stop him in his tracks. He'd known them all his life. Never again. Never again. He turns to face whatever it is rumbling over the stones of Independence Square. (199)

This time Cudjoe does not try to escape the ghosts of the past; he does not try to exit history. Although these sentences are the final words of the novel, the resonant phrase "never again" indicates a rejection of the foreclosed end. It underscores the ethical imperative to resist cultural amnesia. Wideman restores past traumas to the main text of the narrative of American history, refusing to allow MOVE and other catastrophes to become footnotes as minor aberrations from the dominant trajectory. In its challenge to the politics of representation and its exposure of the exclusionary practices central to the nation's self-definition, Philadelphia Fire reveals how central to the story are MOVE and its apocalyptic end.

Chapter Three:

Determined Plots, Narrative Ends, and Apocalyptic Closure:

E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime and

Robert Coover's The Public Burning

E. L. Doctorow's Ragtime and Robert Coover's The Public Burning resist the ideological foreclosure at work in the dominant ideology's promotion of an apocalyptic end of history. Each novel builds toward an apocalyptic ending with an ever-increasing sense of relentless inevitability; yet each also insistently interrupts the momentum of narrative continuity in order to deny that ending an unambiguous consolation of closure, thereby deflecting its rhetorical force. Stephen O'Leary's distinction between comic and tragic variants of apocalyptic history provides one way to consider the means by which Doctorow and Coover negotiate the cynical triumphalism that often inhabits the national ideology's narrative of the end. Both Ragtime and The Public Burning can be understood as versions of comic apocalypse, a narrative of the end that criticizes the teleological certainties of apocalyptic history "from within its own foundational assumptions" (221, emphasis added). In his analysis of the ideological force of apocalyptic rhetoric in American culture, O'Leary argues that the "tragic mode" is dominant. The logic of tragic apocalypse often encourages a retreat into private life and a passive acquiescence to an imminent end, while it consequently discourages

active efforts at political and social change by implicitly suggesting or explicitly stating that such attempts are futile against the force of the immanent end. In the face of the inevitable, it urges, one can neither argue nor forestall, but only prepare.[1]

In tragic apocalypse the problems of history are externalized onto a cosmic or seemingly monolithic Other so that history becomes History and quotidian contingency is rendered superfluous. The end of history is already determined in tragic apocalypse as a foregone conclusion: History becomes the unfolding of a preordained or foreknown truth, and apocalyptic rhetoric becomes less a matter of persuasion or conviction than one of ensuring the correct position toward those external forces. In comic apocalypse, on the other hand, the end is not foreclosed by strategic appeals to destiny, and the significance of human agency is instead emphasized (O'Leary 88-92).[2] The end of history, in other words, is proffered as

---

[1] While the subject of O'Leary's discussion is religious apocalypse, his emphasis is always on its popular manifestations in American culture. As his discussion of the political uses of apocalyptic rhetoric makes clear, such rhetoric dominated early Cold War discourse and again during the 1980s. The consequences of its revival during the Reagan presidency were diagnosed by Doctorow in "The State of Mind of the Union," an essay published in 1986, in which he attacked contemporary new writers and deconstructionist critics for what he saw as their collective retreat from the social and political consequences of a historically engaged fiction. Doctorow maintained that such diminished horizons reveal "the secret story of American life under the bomb" (Nation, 22 March 1986, 331).

[2] O'Leary's theory of tragic and comic apocalypse relies on Kenneth Burke's notion of tragic and comic "frames of acceptance" developed in his 1936 book Attitudes toward History (repr. Berkeley: U California P, 1984). Richard Rorty also borrows from Burke in his discussion of the debate generated by Fukuyama's end-of-history thesis, advocating that we regard history in the comic frame. "If we adopt Burke's conception of history," he writes, "we might become less fond of apocalyptic talk of crisis and endings, less inclined to eschatology. For

the always deferred "not yet" or "still not" achievement of human effort, and its failure to arrive is underscored as the result of human limitations (individual error, cultural ignorance, social intransigence) rather than the suprahuman forces of historical, natural, or providential necessity. Of course, tragic events can occur in comic apocalypse, as they do in Ragtime and The Public Burning, but they are presented as the result of human agency operating within the contested social space of history rather than as the unfortunate fallout of already determined historical laws of continuity and evolution.[3]

Both Ragtime and The Public Burning criticize the total models of history premised by tragic apocalypse. Their method is one of comic excess--an excess of what-if narrative contingencies, accidents, and trajectories--that questions the historical necessity assumed by

---

we should no longer imagine a great big Incarnate Logos called Humanity whose career is to be interpreted either as heroic struggle or as tragic decline. Instead, we should think of lots of different past human communities, each of which has willed us one or more cautionary anecdotes" ("The End of Leninism and History as Comic Frame," in Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman, eds., History and the Idea of Progress [Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1995], 225-26).

[3] The real dangers of an apocalyptic conception of history became obvious in the global divisions of the Cold War and its arm race. The habit of externalizing domestic problems onto foreign individuals, groups, and nations is the subject of William Appleman Williams's revisionary history of official U.S. policy. His The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (1959, and revised 1962) specifically informs Doctorow's The Book of Daniel, which cites it, and, I think, also influences Ragtime's criticism of American imperialism. See The Tragedy of American Diplomacy, rev. ed. (New York: Dell, 1962) and Henry W. Berger, ed., A William Appleman Williams Reader (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992). The Cold War construction of history in the tragic mode, as well as official manipulation of it, is the object of much of The Public Burning's satire.

tragic apocalypse. One hazard of undermining the teleological structure of closed models of historical process, however, is the possibility that history might be wholly arbitrary and significant change therefore chimerical. But Ragtime and The Public Burning avoid the charge of historical relativism by insisting on the crucial role of human agency. They do so by first engaging and then implicating the reader in the guilty pleasure of not only reading for the plot, but especially of reading for the promised apocalyptic ending in which textual meaning will be finally stabilized into a revelation of historical truth. Peter Brooks describes this desire for the conclusion of narrative as the "anticipation of retrospection": that withheld but ultimately pleasurable moment of readerly illumination when the obscure relationship between origins and ends is made manifest (23). Ragtime provides a series of seemingly ever-multiplying repetitions, duplications, and parallels that invite the reader to locate some transcendent order or final cause that would both explain them and bring their seriality to a fixed end in the satisfying stasis of unequivocal closure. The Public Burning offers the spectacle of coterminous historical trajectories that the reader expects will either converge into a determinate resolution or collide in a cathartic catastrophe whose denouement will establish the closure of sequence and confirm historical order. In each novel, the reader is encouraged both to desire the certainties of the apocalyptic end and to examine the social and political consequences of that search for the determined historical endpoint.

Yet, while each novel concludes at an apparently inevitable end, its ideological power is deflated. The possibility of historical melioration is underscored when the reader recognizes

that although both Ragtime and The Public Burning resist the end as an ideological terminus, a privileged site of narrative stasis where nothing more can or need be said, both nonetheless valorize it as the longed for utopian goal of an end of history that can only be achieved by human agency operating within the social spaces that make up history. The end of history, each novel stresses, is an always deferred future goal actively constructed and continuously reconstructed rather than passively awaited.

Repetition and the Diversion of the End: Ragtime

In each of his novels, E. L. Doctorow is concerned with the narrativity of history, with how our means of understanding the past is necessarily through story. "There is no history except as it is composed," he writes in his much cited "False Documents" (24), an essay written in part to defend the method and critical assumptions of Ragtime. According to Doctorow, the writing of history is as much a cultural production as the writing of a novel, leading him to propose "that there is no fiction or non-fiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative" (26). A frequent concern of his novels is not merely the ways in which the narrative forms of cultural myths shape national history, but also the shared responsibility of the writer and reader to rehistoricize those myths, to return them to history, and thereby to recognize who does and does not have the power to claim the mastery of

defining history and why. In a recent interview, Doctorow remarked of both his fiction and essays:

> What I'm invading is the realm of myth: myth whose mask is history. And possibly one of the functions of reinvention, in this sense, is turning myth back into history. If myths aren't examined and questioned and dealt with constantly they harden and become dangerous. They become a structured belief and they make people insane. Society becomes monolithic and despotic, in one way or another. (Marranca 211)

Because of this emphasis on cultural myths, closure as the potential locus of ideological foreclosure is generally problematic in Doctorow's novels. Some provide within their conclusions two-dimensional, stereotyped, or kitsch representations of American destiny: The Book of Daniel (1971) offers Disneyland's facile simulacra of American history, World's Fair (1985) presents the seductive promises of a future technotopia, and Ragtime closes with the reassuring images of community and continuity in the "Our Gang" movie-serials and patriotic parades. Other novels by Doctorow end in variations of cultural fantasy. Loon Lake (1980) awards its dubious hero wealth and power, just as the boy-hero of Billy Bathgate (1989) is finally rewarded with the fulfilled infantile desires for money, a baby, and Mom, and The Waterworks (1994) offers a fairy-tale vision of a sinister New York transformed into glittering ice after its villains are defeated and its heroes each receive a desirable bride and social promotion. Of course, none of these endings is presented without irony or ambiguity. Rather,

each offers an illusory but nonetheless compelling closure that gestures toward the impossible final fulfillment of human desire.[4] That definitive consummation of desire, each of these narrative endings suggests, can never be fully achieved, thereby calling into question the ideological foreclosure operating within generic forms of textual closure. But, what is more important, Doctorow's texts insist that it is not enough simply to question or even attack the end of history as portrayed by the dominant ideology; there remains an ethical imperative to construct--and continue to reconstruct--alternative ends. As "False Documents" maintains: "There is no history except as it is composed. . . . That is why history has to be written and rewritten from one generation to another. The act of composition can never end" (24).

The parodic method of Ragtime places in radical doubt even the tentative consolation of historical finitude with which Doctorow's previous novel, The Book of Daniel, concludes. Offering three endings, that novel closes with the biblical voice of prophecy: "Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end" (303). In many ways a post-apocalyptic narrative, The Book of Daniel ends by gesturing towards the literal end of history from whose retrospect the meaning of historical process can be conclusively determined. Ragtime, Doctorow's next novel, initially promises this consolation of the end

---

[4] Peter Brooks argues that desire is not only often the subject of narrative, but is also the "motor force" of narrative. Because desire "is initiatory of narrative, motivates and energizes its reading, and animates the combinatory play of sense-making" (48), the ending is especially privileged as the promised moment of desire's fulfilment: "If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie at the end, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire for the end" (52).

but finally withholds it. In its opening paragraph it offers a would-be omniscient view of the first years of twentieth-century America:

> The population customarily gathered in great numbers either out of doors for parades, public concerts, fish fries, political picnics, social outings, or indoors in meeting halls, vaudeville theaters, operas, ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants. (3-4)

Missing from this panoramic view of "the population," "people," and "everyone" are those whom conventional history marginalized, the socially and politically oppressed, whose historic experience of invisibility Doctorow likens structurally, through paratactic connection, to sexual repression. They are the unseen, the ideological unspoken, of the Gilded Age--a time of unprecedented prosperity that encouraged among some the complacent assumption that history was coming to an end--and whose emphatically visible invisibility undermines that triumphalist thinking.[5] In the words of David Gross: "when we see 'all people' dressed in

---

[5] Recall Arnold Toynbee's description of the certainty among many in the West at the turn of the twentieth century that history had arrived at its end. See above, page 6, note 5.

white and amusing themselves we are actually seeing the past as if only the ruling class existed, specifically ignoring the very existences of the Negroes and immigrants who provide for its privileged position" (130). The reader therefore assumes that the rest of Ragtime will remedy this obvious absence by restoring the socially, culturally, and politically invisible to their rightfully visible place in history. In other words, the first pages of the novel seem to promise that the initiatory lack figured in the obviously inegalitarian exclusions of the opening panorama will be rectified at--and by--the end.

But Ragtime both does and does not do this work of restoration. While that exclusion is remedied at the end, it is not unambiguously or triumphantly overcome by it. The novel concludes with a newly formed inclusive family, but the corrosive irony of the text, as well as its enigmatic repetitions, undermines any stability of closure. This narrative instability is present from the first page where the seemingly neutral sequence of the simple declarative sentences of Ragtime's opening is undermined by what Richard King calls its "paratactic gaps" into which the reader can fall (54). The reader is immediately presented with a quantity of material asking for interpretation. How, for example, does one fill in the perplexing but inviting gaps between the following sentences that introduce Evelyn Nesbit?

> She had been a well-known artist's model at the age of fifteen. Her underclothes were white. Her husband habitually whipped her. She happened once to meet Emma Goldman, the revolutionary. Goldman lashed her with her tongue. Apparently there were Negroes. There were immigrants. And

> though the newspapers called the shooting the Crime of the Century, Goldman knew it was only 1906 and there were ninety-four years to go. (5)

What is the narrative logic that connects Evelyn Nesbit's body to Emma Goldman's knowledge that the century (and presumably history) has a long way to go? The logic, at first, is apparently clear: the text seems to promise an understanding of the female body as the locus of desire and also the site of contempt. In this reading Goldman thus "lashes" Nesbit with the painful truth of her words in order to awaken a feminist consciousness within her. But the parallelism of these sentences associates Emma Goldman's tongue-lashings with Harry Thaw's literal lashings of Evelyn Nesbit: "Her husband habitually whipped her. . . . Goldman lashed her with her tongue." The insane Harry Thaw is the violent but cosseted scion of the triumphalist Gilded Age; he is the criminal embodiment of property and capital, representing everything Emma Goldman's anarchism would like to abolish. If in this opening paragraph Goldman and Thaw are rendered parallel (a parallel that is later repeated when Goldman's massaging of Evelyn's thighs and buttocks [53] recalls Thaw's whipping of those same parts [20]), are they also thus rendered equivalent? And how then is the reader logically to connect Emma Goldman's verbal lashings and Harry Thaw's literal lashings to the emphatic but unmotivated and sudden realization (and <u>whose</u> realization?) that there "<u>were</u> Negroes" and there "<u>were</u> immigrants"? Just as the exclusions of the initial panorama seem to indicate their final rectification in a truly democratic presentation of the populace by the novel's end, <u>Ragtime</u>'s opening also seems to promise an answer to the continuing presence of violence,

cruelty, and oppression. The reader is invited to believe that the perplexing problems raised in the introductory paragraphs will be finally resolved in closure.

These and other questions arise throughout Ragtime, requiring the reader to read attentively and coaxing her to make careful connections: "Do not play this piece fast," warns the epigraph taken from Scott Joplin; "It is never right to play Ragtime fast." Much of the seductive nature of Ragtime is created by its invitations to fill in the paratactic gaps, its enticements to discern a satisfying unity that would explicate its insistent parallels. Yet the text, in its presentation of enigmatic replications and repetitions that suggest a determinate source but finally thwart such an explanation, continuously encourages but frustrates such a reading practice. One such moment is the carefully elaborated "strange confrontation" between Harry Houdini and Harry Thaw in the Tombs (26). Incarcerated and naked in a cell on Murderer's Row, Houdini picks the lock of the cell door and begins to put on his clothes. Directly across from him, meanwhile, Thaw watches Houdini from his cell, which "glowed like a stage" (26). In a balletic symmetry, Thaw undresses as Houdini dresses and then flaps his penis between the bars of his locked cell while Houdini flees his. Later, the reader is asked to recall this "grotesque mimic[ry]" (26) when, after his escape and capture, Harry Thaw tells the police: "Just call me Houdini" (165). How, now in retrospect, is the symmetry that characterized the strange confrontation, and here apparently confirmed, to be understood? Is it that Houdini, despite his artistry at escape, will always be a prisoner of his class, while Thaw, despite his criminality, will always be able to escape his punishment because of his

class? Perhaps. My point, however, is that Ragtime, having fully established a detailed and intriguing parallel between the two characters at the descriptive level, offers little more at the thematic level. It refuses to specify the similarities and/or differences within the parallel relationship, or to discriminate between them. To do so would identify a determinate source of evaluation that might not just explain the connection, but also stabilize it.

Such observations are not meant as a criticism of Doctorow's novel; indeed, much of the pleasure of Ragtime, as well as the intellectual impact of the ambiguity of its ending, is generated by just this sort of readerly frustration. The reader's thwarted desire that tries, in its anticipation of retrospection, to fix the various interpretive connections between the characters and their narrative trajectories, that tries to make them satisfactorily connect into a coherent whole, is encapsulated in Doctorow's presentation of Theodore Dreiser's dilemma:

> Coincidentally this was the time in our history when the morose novelist Theodore Dreiser was suffering terribly from the bad reviews and negligible sales of his first book, Sister Carrie. Dreiser was out of work, broke and too ashamed to see anyone. He rented a furnished room in Brooklyn and went to live there. He took to sitting on a wooden chair in the middle of the room. One day he decided his chair was facing in the wrong direction. Raising his weight from the chair, he lifted it with his two hands and turned it to the right, to align it properly. For a moment he thought the chair was aligned, but then he decided it was not. He moved it another turn to the right. He tried sitting

> in the chair now but it still felt peculiar. He turned it again. Eventually he made a complete circle and still he could not find the proper alignment for the chair. The light faded on the dirty window of the furnished room. Through the night Dreiser turned his chair in circles seeking the proper alignment. (23, emphasis added)

"Coincidentally"? Coincident to what? This might seem an overly fussy question, but in a novel that self-consciously abounds with coincidences, and often extravagant ones, it is a question worth raising. This description of Dreiser's compulsive behavior, quoted in full, comes at the end of a chapter (conventionally a place of rhetorical emphasis) devoted to Evelyn Nesbit and her rehearsed testimony for Harry Thaw's defence. Does the coincidence indicate a parallel between Nesbit and Dreiser's Carrie Meeber? Again: perhaps. Evelyn, like Carrie, was born in poverty but acquired wealth through her beauty and desirability. Evelyn's body is the model for the bronze Diana atop Madison Square Garden and her face is the original for Charles Dana Gibson's "The Eternal Question" (5); she was once an "aspiring actress" (20) who now performs at her husband's trial, just as Carrie becomes a successful actress whose face is "a thing the world likes to see, because it's a natural expression of its longing" (Dreiser 385). But here, too, such a parallel remains inconclusive; it is introduced and then dropped.

The reader again tries to interpret retrospectively when Dreiser's frustrated actions are soon deliberately recalled by Peary's similarly frustrated attempts to find the exact location of the North Pole:

> Peary lay on his stomach and with a pan of mercury and a sextant, some paper and a pencil, he calculated his position. It did not satisfy him. He walked further along the floe and took another sighting. This did not satisfy him. All day long Peary shuffled back and forth over the ice, a mile one way, two miles another, and made his observations. No one observation satisfied him. He would walk a few steps due north and find himself going due south. On this watery planet the sliding sea refused to be fixed. He couldn't find the exact place to say this spot, here, is the North Pole. (67-68)

Unlike Doctorow's presentation of Peary's inability to locate the North Pole, his presentation of Dreiser's inability to align his chair to an equally indeterminate fixed point, while seemingly full of significance--given its carefully portentous description--is apparently gratuitous. While Peary's futile quest suggests the bankruptcy of imperial ambition, Dreiser's is not clearly indicative of anything much important. It is essentially a throwaway paragraph of excess information. In the words of Arthur Saltzman, who describes the effect of these enigmatic replications: "we are gratified by the connections . . . [yet] we are still disheartened by how seemingly fruitless these connections are" (96-97). Like the parallel between Evelyn Nesbit

and Carrie Meeber suggested by the narrator but left unresolved, Dreiser and his obsession for the exact alignment is suddenly introduced and just as suddenly dropped.

Despite its apparently gratuitous nature as thematic content, however, Dreiser's dilemma is similar to the reader's. He obsessively tries to achieve the proper alignment of his chair to some fixed point of reference that is never identified: "Raising his weight from the chair, he lifted it with his two hands and turned it to the right, to align it properly [to what?]. For a moment he thought the chair was aligned [to what?], but then he decided it was not." Alignment is an important concept in Ragtime. J. P. Morgan, for example, believes "that there are universal patterns of order and repetition that give meaning to this planet" (123), and he sees in Henry Ford's assembly line, another alignment, "not merely a stroke of industrial genius but a projection of organic truth." "All mammals reproduce in the same way," he tells Ford, "and share the same designs of self-nourishment, with digestive and circulatory systems that are recognizably the same, and they enjoy the same senses" (122, emphasis added). Ragtime's insistent but enigmatic replications of the same in the other urge the reader to discover universal patterns of order in repetition that project a historical alignment of evolutionary development. In its presentation of the sudden good fortune of Tateh, who finally achieves his success by "point[ing] his life along the lines of flow of American energy" (111), the novel even implies that proper alignment is the necessary "key" to the fulfillment of expectations and desire, suggesting an exemplary interpretive practice. Taking this cue, the reader is enticed to discern a total system that would stabilize the significance of the

narrative repetitions in a coherent pattern of continuity. But, like Peary, she cannot locate the determinate pole to say this spot, here, is the fixed source of meaning. And, like Dreiser, she continues to seek the proper alignment, always reading to arrive at the point of narrative stasis--the end--from whose point of retrospect the connections between Ragtime's many parallels and duplications will be fully realized in a satisfying principle of explanation.[6]

---

[6] In his own account of his "nervous prostration" Dreiser specifically describes his obsessive behavior as an irresistible urge to achieve the satisfying stability that follows the arrival at a fixed point of certainty: the end of the never-ending circle and the end of the infinite line. In the uncompleted An Amateur Laborer, composed in 1904, he writes: "Always when I was sitting in a chair I would keep readjusting it--trying to bring myself into correct alignment with something, and at the same time would keep turning to the right until I would be quite turned around. At the same time if I were reading a newspaper I would keep turning it from angle to angle trying to get the columns to look straight, a thing which they never did. Always when I was walking I would look straight ahead, wondering at the obstruction which fixed objects like houses and trees offered to a direct progress and feeling an irresistible desire to be rid of them or to go right through them" (An Amateur Laborer, ed. Richard W. Dowell, James L. W. West III, and Neda M. Westlake [Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1983], 26). Dreiser's sense of being mastered by a repetition compulsion is analogous to the reader's experience of what Freud would describe as the "uncanny" effects of Ragtime that urge her to ascribe a transcendent but hidden meaning to the obstinate recurrences of its many coincidences, parallels, and replications so that she, like Dreiser, might acquire and maintain a "direct progress" toward the end. (Freud's ideas regarding the mastery of repetition and their application to Ragtime are discussed below.)

Narrative Alignment, Revisionary Parody, and the Deferral of the End

One such principle of explanation that Ragtime both invites but refuses is history conceived as a totality of continuity and progress, leading some readers to argue that the novel presents history as meaningless flux or an eternal return of the same.[7] One of the most pointed reactions comes from Fredric Jameson, who regards Ragtime as symptomatic of posthistorical paralysis, which he describes as the loss of a historical perspective that attenuates the sense of future possibility by foreshortening the sense of the past. The relentless parodic method of Ragtime clearly indicates that it places in critical doubt such models of history as the transformational powers of the dialectic overcoming of contradiction,

---

[7] Herwig Friedl interprets an entropic process, the result of the centrifugal forces of power ("Power and Degradation: Patterns of Historical Process in the Novels of E. L. Doctorow," in E. L. Doctorow: A Democracy of Perception, ed. Herwig Friedl and Dieter Schulz [Essen: Blaue Eule, 1988], 19-44); David Emblidge argues that Ragtime presents a cyclic view of history, a present that continually repeats the past because of unalterable human nature ("Marching Backward into the Future: Progress as Illusion in Doctorow's Novels," Southwest Review 62 [Autumn 1977]: 397-409); with similar assumptions, Charles Berryman finds a timeless human nature foiled by historical necessity ("Ragtime in Retrospect," The South Atlantic Quarterly 81 [Winter 1982]: 30-42); Christopher Morris argues that all of Doctorow's novels present history as "meaningless redundancy" (Models of Misrepresentation: On the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow [Jackson and London: UP Mississippi, 1991], 111); Paul Levine takes exception to those readings of the novel that interpret a cyclical view of a meaningless history, arguing that Ragtime does indeed offer a vision of historical progress, albeit a difficult one (E. L. Doctorow [London and New York: Methuen, 1985], 50-61). For my purposes, Richard King's argument is persuasive; he observes that in Ragtime "history, the realm of sequence and difference, seems to generate repetitions, while repetition, the phenomenon that gives the lie to temporal difference, inevitably generates its own impossibility and thus becomes sequence" ("Between Simultaneity and Sequence," in Friedl and Schulz, 47).

a doubt that Jameson notes is already apparent in Doctorow's previous novels. What Jameson finds most troubling, however, is that Ragtime breaks from Doctorow's previous practice, which always maintained an explicit historical link between the reader's present and the text's narrated past. Ragtime thus marks for Jameson a "crisis in historicity" (Postmodernism 22).[8] He notes that the novel requires of the reader a new type of reading, but one in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to integrate its characters into a stable narrative structure of meaningful continuity: "The novel not only resists interpretation, it is organized systematically and formally to short-circuit an older type of social and historical interpretation which it perpetually holds out and withdraws" (23). The narrative model he refers to is the classical historical novel, and likely as defined by Georg Lukács. Yet, unlike that novel's confidence in the capacity of classic realist narrative to represent the essential totality of the past, Ragtime "can only 'represent' our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes 'pop history')." For Jameson, Doctorow's novel is thus exemplary of "the disapperance of the

---

[8] In a 1994 interview, Michael Wutz read to Doctorow Jameson's assertion that Ragtime is symptomatic of a posthistorical "eclipse of historicity, the loss of any vital imaginative sense of the past, in all its radical difference from us." Wutz then continued to read that Ragtime, "better than any other recent novel strikingly dramatizes the transformation of the past, under postmodernism, into the sheer images and stereotypes of that past, the displacement of the past as referent with a new experience of the past as simulacrum and as pseudo-past" (quoted from Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Amerikastudien / American Studies 29 (1) 1984: 53-73). Doctorow's response: "I find it hard to believe that a reasonably attentive reader, let alone a professional critic, would misconstrue the irreverent spirit of that book" (Wutz, "An Interview with E.L. Doctorow," in Conversations with E.L. Doctorow, ed. Christopher D. Morris [Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1999], 192).

historical referent" (Postmodernism 25). But has the historical referent entirely disappeared? Or has it instead changed or shifted because of the destabilizing effects of mass culture--a mass culture conditioned not only by mass media but also by mass education?[9] Jameson, I think, here underestimates the revisionary potential of Doctorow's critical parody, overlooking how the reader is not positioned as a passive consumer of the text but is actively challenged to "make sense" of historical process and therefore also challenged to "make sense" of the continuous struggle for human progress. The American radical past is not given an obituary

---

[9] Jameson criticizes Ragtime for relying on popular images and even stereotypes of history. But when was it otherwise? Was it ever possible to read a historical novel without the mediation of prior images, whether highbrow or lowbrow? What was Walter Scott appealing to, for example, when he portrayed Jacobite intrigue and clan warfare in Rob Roy except his readers' already formed knowledge gleaned from both high and low sources--an already present and ideologically structured "preknowledge" that Scott necessarily relies on? Scott's contemporary readers gathered their history from oral sources and texts as well as visual sources that ranged from cheap illustrations to heroic history paintings and their countless reproductions. Does such prior mediation debase or diminish the historicity of Scott's representations of the past? Jameson acknowledges the historical novel's reliance on the mediating nature of this preknowledge, but he implies that Ragtime's recourse to "mediatized" images somehow degrades the dignity of the past: "all historical novels, beginning with those of Sir Walter Scott himself, no doubt in one way or another involve a mobilization of previous historical knowledge generally acquired through the schoolbook history manuals devised for whatever legitimizing purpose by this or that national tradition--thereafter instituting a narrative dialectic between what we already 'know' about The Pretender, say, and what he is then seen to be concretely in the pages of the novel. But Doctorow's procedure seems much more extreme than this" (Postmodernism 23-24). Despite his stress elsewhwere on the ways in which the physical environment shapes the individual subject, Jameson's disdain for image-consumption leads him here to assume that the much contested and fetishized object known as "history" is primarily a textual experience. His focus here on history as generally the manipulated preknowledge acquired from schoolbooks is revealing, for his complaint about Ragtime is, I think, finally about the correct authorization of history and its proper control.

in Ragtime, as Jameson assumes; rather, the disconcerting reading practices the novel demands emphasize how, to echo Doctorow's "False Documents," the act of the composition of history can never end. History, in other words, is actively made by writers and readers and not simply passively received.[10]

In The Historical Novel Lukács maintains that the most effective historical novels reveal history as a total process by "show[ing] convincingly and powerfully the irresistible course of social-historical development" (144). Those developments, the "struggles and antagonisms of history," are embodied by characters "who, in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces" (34); the individual features of character

---

[10] Gérard Genette emphasizes in Palimpsests how parody is never simply a scornful caricature of the original text. Rather, genuine parody is both a hommage to its object and a criticism of it that requires the reader to recognize the exhaustion of the by now socially and politically "saturated" signifier which the parody ridicules, thereby urging the reader to consider a better replacement (Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky [Lincoln and London: U Nebraska P, 1997]). Jameson presents Ragtime as illustrative of what he distinguishes as postmodern pastiche, which he describes as a collusively "neutral" practice of facile parody that offers up style in place of substance (Postmodernism 16-18). But this overlooks how Ragtime is more than simple mimicry when it forces its reader to acknowledge his or her participation in the narrative constructions of history--a textual practice that works to reaffirm agency rather than merely compensate for its absence. Barbara Foley also applies a Lukácsian understanding of the historical novel in her comparison of Ragtime to John Dos Passos's U.S.A., concluding that Doctorow's novel valorizes artistic inventiveness at the expense of a fundamental understanding of "the 'objective' nature of historical reality" (173). Implicit in Foley's discussion is the assumption that Doctorow's parody is a breach of literary decorum, leading her, too, to underestimate its critical nature. See "From U.S.A. to Ragtime: Notes on the Forms of Historical Consciousness in Modern Fiction," in Richard Trenner, ed., E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1983), 158-78.

and action thus reveal the workings of larger sociopolitical forces that determine the narrative end of the characters' specific trajectories (201). For Lukács, the classical historical novel therefore endorses a progressive model of history when it is motivated by "the conception of history as the destiny of the people" (201). Ragtime can be understood as a critical parody of the historical novel not because it regards such assumptions about historical progress as naive or utterly misguided but because it wants both to refuse the dominant ideology's claims to embody the logic of an already determined end of history and, at the same time, to present that end of history as the goal of human potential. Why, it asks, is the end of narrative (and, more precisely, the end of history's narrative) an object of desire? And how has the desire for the end been historically co-opted?

As a strategic revision of the classical historical novel, Ragtime undermines the teleological plot of historical destiny; instead, accident and contingency are allowed to disrupt the narrative in an excess of repetition that the text finally refuses to master in an unambiguous closure. Ragtime announces its project to deflate the triumphalism of the dominant ideology's version of the end by beginning with two failed arrivals at a proper destination. One is an accidental arrival and the other is one that is simply thwarted: the crash of Harry Houdini's car outside the New Rochelle house interrupts Father's and Mother's Sunday afternoon coitus.[11]

---

[11] Emily Miller Budick stresses the strategic nature of the coitus interruptus of the opening scene, seeing in this deferral of the end what she terms an "absent history" whose space of historical possibilities Doctorow explores: "Doctorow understands the importance of opening this space: it will become, in the course of his book, a mechanism for moral and social change"

In a similar fashion, the gratuitous nature of the Little Boy's parting words to Houdini to "Warn the Duke" (9), a parody of the textual convention of foreshadowing, also deflates the portentousness of the apocalyptic end. The warning is an example of what Michael André Bernstein terms "sideshadowing": an emphasis on the contingent and haphazard (here the unmotivated) that questions the foregone conclusions of apocalyptic history (1). While the boy's parting words foreshadow Franz Ferdinand's assassination, which will "cause" World War One in the linear narrative of history, their ominous nature is undermined by Doctorow's presentation of Houdini's failure to recognize the archduke when he later meets him--a failure of recognition that is mutual: "The Archduke Franz Ferdinand didn't seem to know who Houdini was. He congratulated him on the invention of the aeroplane" (87). These sentences conclude Part One of Ragtime, but nowhere in this scene is there a sense of the tragedy of a missed or lost opportunity. Rather, the emphasis is on one standard device of comedy: mistaken identity.[12]

(Fiction and Historical Consciousness [New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1989], 187).

[12] Douglas Fowler assumes that Houdini's missed opportunity to heed the boy's warning is unambiguously tragic because Houdini fails to recognize the decisive moment of alignment between and among various trajectories of history--a failure that causes an inexorable unfolding of tragic consequences. In Fowler's words: "Almost halfway through the novel Houdini will have his chance to indeed 'warn the Duke.' Tragically, he will miss it. Houdini does not yet sense that the boy's words are an authentic signal to him from the Other Side, and the magician's recognition of their supernatural identity only comes much later and will even then be incomplete" (Understanding E. L. Doctorow [Columbia, SC: U South Carolina P, 1992], 63). But this emphasis on the tragic presumes a determinist history that imposes a reductively monolithic model on a heterogeneous past. It therefore also overlooks

The teleological model of history implicit in the classical historical novel suggests that a correct knowledge of historical continuity is possible, allowing one to recognize, as the Little Boy seems to do but Houdini does not, those moments in history when the correct action can be taken to align or re-align historical trajectories. Yet, as suggested by the

---

Doctorow's obvious efforts to undermine any sense of history in the tragic frame when Houdini does finally comprehend the boy's warning. As he hangs upside down over Broadway in 1914, his belated understanding is accompanied not only by the appropriate oohs and aahs of the crowd below but is also immediately preceded by the following exchange between Houdini and an anonymous onlooker at a window directly beside him: "Hey, Houdini, the man said, fuck you. Up yours, Jack, the magician replied" (267). This scene, like so many others, invites an allegorical interpretation: is Houdini, suspended over New York City, also at this moment suspended in historical time, allowing him a glimpse of the total scheme of History? But again, the urge to find a significant meaning is undermined by the seemingly inappropriate and apparently pointless "fuck you" and "up yours." Here, as elsewhere, Doctorow's emphasis is on the accidental and haphazard, making the seemingly significant moment pointedly deflationary.

Doctorow's presentation of the two scenes--one of misrecognition, the other of belated recognition--rigorously refuses what Bernstein terms the "backshadowing" often encountered in texts, whether fictional or nonfictional, that rely on an apocalyptic understanding of history. Backshadowing is the most pernicious variant of foreshadowing, according to Bernstein. It is a "retroactive foreshadowing" of historic events whose outcome is already understood by both narrator and reader as part of a determinate cause-and-effect narrative plot. Backshadowing of historic catastrophes can therefore create a sort of hubristic collusion between the text and its audience because it fosters the judgment, and sometimes even the condemnation, that the participants in those past events "should have known," like their later (and usually comfortable) reader, what was to come (16). That collusion between text and reader, which ignores the messiness of the past by assuming that what now seem to be decisive moments must have been obvious <u>if only</u> the participants in those past events had understood as we now presume to understand, is both elicited but finally refused by <u>Ragtime</u>. Because the novel foregrounds how our sense of historicity is often a matter of our response to ideology's promise of a securely knowable plot of history, <u>Ragtime</u> asks its readers to consider how such easy collusion about the foregone conclusions of history has forestalled real responsibility for historical change.

insistent manner in which Ragtime both invites but then disappoints stabilizing interpretations of its many parallels and replications, the novel relentlessly undermines the notion of a master plot of history. This helps to explain the irony with which Doctorow presents Emma Goldman's words to Evelyn Nesbit when she defines what she sees as their historically significant relationship. Like the reader who resorts to some transcendent cause to elucidate the suggestive parallels between various characters and their actions, Goldman divines a "mystical rule of all experience" (49) that structures the "correspondences" inhabiting "the total human fate" (52). There is even a disturbing note of the totalitarian in Goldman's rhetorical questions: "Who can say who are the instrumentalities and who are the people. Which of us causes, and lives in others to cause, and which of us is meant thereby to live" (50).

Because Ragtime calls into question the authority of master plots of history, few of its characters progress along an unambiguous narrative trajectory. Mother, for example, does not develop into a fully emancipated woman, even though her experience of managing Father's factory does demystify her view of Father and his business world: "all its mysterious potency was dissipated and she saw it for the dreary unimaginative thing it was" (210). If Mother changes, however, she does not necessarily progress when she moves from the nineteenth-century domestic ideal of the angel in the house to the twentieth-century consumerist ideal of the woman of leisure. Father is disturbed to find on her bedside table Molly Elliot Seawell's The Ladies' Battle and "a pamphlet on the subject of family limitation"

by Emma Goldman (94). But these two texts are not the radical works they are generally taken to be by many analyses of the novel. Despite its seemingly suffragist title, the first is profoundly conservative: Seawell attacked women's suffrage, warning that it would inaugurate a general social revolution. Likewise, despite Goldman's sensational reputation as a revolutionary advocate of free love, her views regarding contraception, abortion, and motherhood were often dismissive of the rights of women as individuals to control their reproduction, and were instead profoundly influenced by the assumptions of eugenics.[13] If

---

[13] Perhaps encouraged by Doctorow's own words about the historical Goldman that, as he told Paul Levine, she represented a "feminist stand on abortion and contraception . . . too monstrous to even think about in 1910," many discussions of Ragtime assume that the books Mother reads unambiguously champion women's rights (Levine, "The Writer as Independent Witness," in E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations, 68). One of the earliest to do so is Phyllis Jones's "Ragtime: Feminist, Socialist and Black Perspectives on the Self-Made Man," which maintains that Mother is "stirred to new forms of self-realization" by, in part, "investigating feminist literature" (20). This assumption informs later readings, such as John G. Parks's: "Ragtime is about the death of the father, of patriarchy, at least of a certain kind. By the same token, it signals the emergence of woman into the new equation of the twentieth century. The voice and influence of Emma Goldman is strong throughout the novel, speaking for the freedom of women from physical and economic and political servitude. . . . Mother awakens to her passions and her strengths and is thus able to participate in the generative forces of history" (E. L. Doctorow 69). But these assertions need to be qualified by the irony with which Goldman is often presented, a destabilizing irony that Christopher Morris takes into account in his argument that Mother, like other characters, merely "undergoes a seeming demystification" (Models of Misrepresentation 103-04). And the assumption about the feminist nature of Mother's reading especially needs to be questioned in the context of Molly Seawell's other writings which, like the 1911 The Ladies Battle, generally endorsed the double standards of their time, according to The Feminist Companion to Literature in English (ed. Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy [London: Batsford, 1990]).

In "The Hypocrisy of Puritanism," an essay included in Anarchism and Other Essays (with which Doctorow is familiar--see the following note), Goldman argued for the necessity of women's legal access to birth control by discussing how repeated pregnancy and childbirth

Doctorow's choice of Mother's bedtime reading material is not haphazard, it indicates that her demystification is only apparent.[14] Christopher Morris, a critic sensitive to the destabilizing effects of Ragtime's relentless repetitions, remarks of her illusory progress: "this supposed learning process does not lead to her independence and autonomy. Instead, Mother's liberation from Father's sexism is finally accomplished through her enchantment with another

---

debilitated their physical and mental health, just as enforced celibacy was detrimental to their well-being. But, because she believed that motherhood was an elevated function more important than any individual woman's own wishes, Goldman also maintained that contraception was equally necessary to control "the indiscriminate breeding of a diseased race" ("The Hypocrisy of Puritanism," in Anarchism and Other Essays [New York: Mother Earth, 1910], 177). For discussions of the influence of contemporary eugenics on Goldman's ideas about birth control, abortion, and motherhood (which, in part, caused a break with Margaret Sanger), see Marian J. Morton, Emma Goldman and the American Left (New York: Twayne, 1992), 76-77; and Bonnie Haaland, Emma Goldman: Sexuality and the Impurity of the State (New York and London: Black Rose, 1993), 77-82.

[14] Many of the statements of Doctorow's Goldman repeat or echo the real-life Goldman's writings in Anarchism and Other Essays. Not only does Ragtime's Goldman allude to Anarchism's "The Modern Drama" and the famous "The Traffic in Women" when she addresses the Socialist Artists' Alliance of the Lower East Side, she also exactly repeats an entire sentence from another essay in the collection, "Marriage and Love": "Those who like Mrs. Alving have paid with blood and tears for their spiritual awakening, repudiate marriage as an imposition, a shallow empty mockery" (45; cf. "Marriage and Love," in Anarchism, 244). Thus Tateh's dismissal of Evelyn Nesbit, "My life is desecrated by whores" (47), spoken to her as Goldman's speech is cut short by the police, is an ironic foreshadowing of yet another replication when he and Mother marry. Parallel to Mameh and Nesbit, both of whom have traded sex in order to survive, Mother follows the social and economic logic outlined by Goldman's "The Traffic in Women." The "economic and social inferiority of woman is responsible for prostitution," writes Goldman in that essay, "[t]hus it is merely a question of degree whether she sells herself to one man, in or out of marriage, or to many men" ("The Traffic in Women," in Anarchism, 185).

man, another manufacturer of (and believer in) illusions" (103). Mother's narrative trajectory, in other words, amounts to a repetition of the same.

Repetition, the Monstrous Sequence, and the Mastery of the End

Thus far I have tried to show how Ragtime, by resisting the stabilizing closure of the narrative end, refuses the dominant ideology's promotion of its already determined end of history. The novel does so through its constant presentation of parallels and replications--insistent repetitions that both interrupt the forward momentum of the plot and invite the reader to locate their explanation in a total model of interpretation, such as the model of the foreknown end that the classical historical novel relies on, only to frustrate that search for a determinate cause. The novel's many duplications and coincidences do not point unambiguously to an identifiable source that would explain their generation, nor do the parallels between its primary characters unambiguously indicate their progress to a stable endpoint of demystification or illumination. Rather, actions and events in Ragtime repeat themselves almost to the point of monotony. The seemingly endless series of repetitions themselves therefore soon become problematic precisely because they threaten to defer, maybe forever, the narrative end, suggesting an interminable and therefore intolerable

sequence of the same that will repeat itself in a form of bad infinity. The end, in other words, is both resisted in Ragtime but soon also desired.

Doctorow addressed the guilty pleasure of reading for the end in The Book of Daniel, and directly in Daniel himself who, like any reader of history, seeks a coherent pattern of continuity among the similarities and differences of past events. A Cold-War victim of those who presume to know the iron laws of History--its foregone conclusions--and a graduate student in history unable to find a thesis, Daniel understands that the meaningful order of a series must arrive at an end if it is to acquire significance: an end of narrative, he realizes, that is at once both human in its desirability but apparently always inhuman in the arbitrary victimization and violence often relied on to achieve that end. Trying to forestall in his narration the sequential arrival at the defining trauma of his past, his parents' execution as atomic spies, Daniel notes: "What is most monstrous is sequence. When we are there why do we withdraw only in order to return? Is there nothing good enough to transfix us? . . . When we come why do we not come forever? The monstrous reader who goes on from one word to the next. The monstrous writer who places one word after another. The monstrous magician" (245-46). And to implicate the reader in this desire for the end--a desire to end the monstrous sequence that therefore also entails the now monstrous reader's guilty desire to see Paul and Rochelle Isaacson finally executed--Doctorow's Daniel directly addresses the reader:

"I suppose you think I can't do the electrocution. I know there is a you. There has always been a you" (295-96).[15]

Like much of The Book of Daniel, Ragtime is intent on deferring the end, trying to keep open what Roland Barthes calls the "dilatory area" of the middle portion between the narrative's beginning and ending. This is the space of postponement and deferral, of perception and misperception, that both promises and delays a full revelation and resolution at the text's end (S/Z 75-76). Ragtime's repetitions always impede the forward movement of the narrative, undermining any easy notions of progress in a straightforward narrative continuity. Of course, repetition of the same in the other is a basic method of the creation of textual meaning, and conventionally a narrative derives much of its authority from a mastery of repetition in closure.[16] But the repetitions in Ragtime that attempt a mastery of the end

---

[15] In his discussion of how narrative is the "quintessential" political issue of The Book of Daniel, Geoffrey Galt Harpham remarks of Daniel's strategic interruption of his narration: "Sequence, the linearity of narrative, has the annalist's (though not the analyst's) claim of reality. But it is monstrous, pressing toward the electrocution, passing indifferently through it, and immediately relegating it to the past. It is magical, making things appear and disappear. And it creates a bond between the reader and writer" ("E. L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative" PMLA 100 [January 1985]: 84). Repetition as a method of protesting the inevitability of the narrative end is already present in Daniel, but as continuous countereffect to the finis of historical sequence it soon also threatens another monstrous series. The reader is thus caught in the same dilemma as Daniel, argues Harpham, "desir[ing] to pass on, to situate events in a closed circuit" (87).

[16] For an examination of the function of repetition in narration see Mieke Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, 2nd ed. (Toronto: U Toronto P, 1997), 92, 111-14. Some of my ideas regarding Ragtime's repetitions as a textual means of mastery were clarified by J. Hillis Miller's "Wuthering Heights: Repetition and the 'Uncanny,'" the third chapter of

soon themselves threaten to master the narrative not just by deferring its resolution, but also by deterring it, suggesting how the end of narrative can be both an object of refusal and yet one of desire.

In its parodic critique of the assumptions of the historical novel, Ragtime emphatically foregrounds the question of why narrative desire should be a desire for the end. Peter Brooks provides one way of thinking about the function of desire in the narrative plot by supplementing narrative theory with Freud's psychoanalytic theory of unconscious drives. Freud recognized that repetition can be a form of mastery. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, he recounts his observations of child's play as a means of compensation and control: a small boy repeatedly throws a toy on a string over the edge of his bed so that it is out of his sight

---

his Fiction and Repetition (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982), 42-72.

The classical historical novel relies on recognizable patterns of repetition to present its parallels and replications in a principle of continuity. Coincidences, for example, indicate deep structural formations within a society, and their historical relevance is either affirmed or discomfirmed by the narrative end. In the conventions of the traditional historical novel, the obvious similarities and differences embodied by primary characters meet one another in an essential confrontation between the socio-political and historic forces they represent, generating a narrative crisis that is eventually resolved in a superior historical order and, for the reader, a superior understanding of history (Lukács 120-24). In Ragtime, however, these encounters are generally presented as haphazard events that escape the various characters' attempts at alignment, even when they are certain that they inhabit the correct sequence--the proper alignment--of History. When Younger Brother, for example, tells Father "You are a complacent man with no thought of history" (250), he is evidently right to attack Father's privileged assumptions that the future belongs to his class and his kind--a future of essentially the same. But, by this point in a novel that has hitherto frustrated the reader's attempts to identify, with certainty, a determinate model of historical process, Younger Brother's beliefs in a fixed future are also seriously undermined.

and then reels it back in, accompanying each action with the equally repetitive exclamations fort (gone) and da (there). Freud interprets the child's game as a symbolic staging of the boy's mother's disappearance and return, a repetitive game that allows the child to assert active control over a distressing situation (his mother's absence) to which he must passively submit (S.E. 18: 14-15). Repetition is here a form of the subject's mastery of the threatening. Brooks identifies a parallel between this form of repetition as an assertion of control and textual repetition as a means of mastering what must be submitted to: the "grammar of plot" that necessitates an end of story is actively impeded by textual repetitions that interrupt the plot's forward momentum (97-98).

Yet repetition, Freud also observed, can also threaten to master the subject. In "The Uncanny," he describes involuntary repetition, the "compulsion to repeat," as forcing upon the subject "the idea of something fateful and inescapable" (S.E. 17: 237). Feelings of the uncanny arise when repetition in the form of doubles and coincidences threatens the subject's sense of self-mastery and control, often tempting him (like the reader of Ragtime as well as some of its characters) "to ascribe a secret meaning to this obstinate recurrence" or "to reduce coincidences of this kind to certain laws, and so deprive them of their uncanny effect" in order to master them (S.E. 17: 238).[17] In "The Uncanny" Freud also refers to the compulsion to

---

[17] Jameson describes Ragtime's distinctive prose-style as uncanny, alluding to Freud's definition of the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" ("The Uncanny" S.E. 17: 220) rather than, I think, refering to the novel's insistent repetitions: "I would argue that the designation of both types of characters--

repeat as proceeding from an instinctual impulse--the "death instinct" or "death drive"--that he fully elaborates in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, where he argues that the repetitive nature of this compulsion betrays its instinctual nature, marking it as more primitive and more elementary than the pleasure principle. Because all living things, Freud believes, are inherently conservative, seeking only to maintain themselves in a state of homeostasis, instincts are not basic drives "tending toward change and progress"; rather, "an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces" (S.E. 18: 36, 38). The organic instinctively seeks a return to the inorganic, according to Freud, therefore indicating that "the aim of all life is death" (S.E. 18: 38). Thus the organism does not maintain its existence in the face of obstacles it must overcome; instead, those obstacles always oblige it to deviate more and more from its "original course" of repetition of the same, causing it to follow "ever more complicated détours before reaching its aim of death" (S.E. 18: 38-39). In light of this drive towards the stasis of death, the status of the self-preservative instinct must therefore be qualified as a "component instinct": instead of trying to prolong the organism's existence, it tries to assure that the living entity follows its "own path to death," a path that is "immanent

---

historical names and capitalized family roles--operates powerfully and systematically to reify all these characters and to make it impossible for us to receive their representation without the prior interception of already acquired knowledge or doxa--something which lends the text an extraordinary sense of déjà vu and a peculiar familiarity one is tempted to associate with Freud's 'return of the repressed' in 'The Uncanny' rather than with any solid historiographic formation on the reader's part" (Postmodernism 24).

in the organism itself. . . . What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion" (S.E. 18: 39, emphasis added).

Freud's various discussions of repetition and the compulsion to repeat may seem a good distance from Doctorow's Ragtime. Yet his ideas regarding repetition as mastery--whether as a form of mastery by the subject or a form of mastery of the subject--help us to think about the novel's own insistent duplications and its simultaneous refusal of and desire for the end. Brooks sees an important analogy between Freud's developmental plot of an organic process that begins with stasis, which is then disturbed by an element of difference, which, in turn, then initiates a meandering but nonetheless determined "detouring" return to stasis, and the paradigmatic plot of narrative that, likewise, begins with a moment of stasis, which is then disrupted by an element of difference, which, in turn, then begins an elaborate but equally determined detour to the "right kind" of satisfying end (103-05). Put differently, narrative "instinctively" seeks its resolution in a return to stasis, the "death of plot," in a form of repetition compulsion by remembering and working through what has been repressed: it works to disclose the obscure relationship between significantly forgotten origins and desired ends in revelatory closure (321). The past, what the narrative repeats as it "works through," is finally illuminated in the mastery of a correct knowledge, thereby allowing the plot to reach its terminus at narrative stasis. This is a process partly discernible in a text's sometimes disturbing repetitions within which, to follow Brooks's metaphor, the regular pulsations of the death drive provide a steady "baseline" to the plot (102-03).

In its presentation of the "duplicated event," Ragtime reveals its investment in repetition as a means to interrupt the relentless drive toward the end of the monstrous sequence. But, in its presentation of the "duplicable event," Ragtime also reveals its suspicion of repetition because that repetition soon threatens to become itself part of another monstrous sequence, but this time one of endlessness. The duplicated event is first valorized in the ability of the Little Boy (a character generally exempted from the corrosive irony with which Doctorow portrays most of the other characters) to observe contradiction without wanting to resolve or overcome it. In a chapter devoted to this special gift of a child-observer who is "alert not only to discarded materials but to unexpected events and coincidences" (96), the boy's ability to accept "that the forms of life were volatile" and that "nothing was immune to the principle of volatility, not even language" (97), is clearly privileged. From his perspective, a point of view that is not rendered with parodic irony, the "endurance of a duplicated event," such as the recordings on the Victrola, is "fascinat[ing]" (98). Likewise, the Little Boy is engrossed with "the mirror as a means of self-duplication," gazing at his two selves and seeing parallel entities, "neither of which claim to be the real one" (98). In his ability to maintain the repetitions of the duplicated event without seeking to fix them in a series with beginning and end, the boy seems to embody the ideal interpretive position.[18]

---

[18] I think this is partly why a number of critics believe that the Little Boy is the narrator of Ragtime. For example, Arthur Saltzman identifies him as the narrator ("The Stylistic Energy of E. L. Doctorow" 95), as does Paul Levine (E. L. Doctorow 52) and John G. Parks (E. L. Doctorow 60-61). Christopher Morris argues that the identity of the narrative voice is

"Fascination" describes the Little Boy's reaction to the duplicated event, and it also describes that of the reader, who, unlike the boy, often tries to read which duplication can claim to be the real one, the one that grounds the others as their origin. Fascination at the infinite nature of repetition, however, soon becomes discomfort and even distress when Doctorow introduces the other duplicable event, the interminable reproduction of the same as represented by Henry Ford's assembly line. Doctorow presents the assembly line of monotonous production of the same as an emblem of the monstrous sequence that dehumanizes by the serial nature of its design:

> The value of the duplicable event was everywhere perceived. . . . At Highland Park, Michigan, the first Model T automobile built on a moving assembly line lurched down a ramp and came to rest in the grass under a clear sky. It was black and ungainly and stood high off the ground. Its inventor regarded it from a distance. . . . In his left hand he held a pocket watch. The employer of many men, a good number of them foreign-born, he had long believed that most human beings were too dumb to make a good living. He'd conceived the idea of breaking down the work operations in the assembly of an automobile to their simplest steps, so that any fool could perform them. . . . From these

---

purposely uncertain and is part of the novel's method that urges the reader to locate a stable and unified point of view but also frustrates that search (Models of Misrepresentation 99-102).

> principles Ford established the final proposition of the theory of industrial manufacture--not only that the parts of the finished product be interchangeable, but that the men who build the products be themselves interchangeable parts. (111-13)

Repetition here is thematized as a principle of the mechanical, the monotonous, the monstrous. It does not master the end by delaying or deferring it; rather, repetition is a means of inhuman mastery, evoking the horror of the uncanny. This threat posed by the infinite seriality of the duplicable event is then underscored in the sinister nature of J. P. Morgan's theory of reincarnated power that he elaborates to Ford: "Why should we not satisfy ourselves of the truth of who we are and the eternal beneficent force which we incarnate?" (126).

The threat posed by the inhuman power of uncanny repetition, a power that suggests the mastery of humans rather than a mastery by them, helps to explain Doctorow's insertion of Coalhouse Walker Jr. midway into Ragtime and directly after the disturbing conversation between Ford and Morgan about the endless repetition of power in the reincarnation of "supermen" like themselves. Walker embodies the element of difference that disrupts the interminable series of the same. His first visit to the New Rochelle house (a house that, when first occupied, seemed to assure its family "that all their days would be warm and fair" [3]) astonishes and outrages Mother, evoking from her an "extreme reaction" (130). Father, too, is disturbed by Walker precisely because his difference undermines the reassurances of the same:

> It occurred to Father one day that Coalhouse Walker Jr. didn't know he was a Negro. The more he thought about this the more true it seemed. Walker didn't act or talk like a colored man. He seemed to be able to transform the customary deferences practiced by his race so that they reflected to his own dignity rather than the recipient's. . . . Father recognized certain dangers in the man. (134)

Just as Walker seems to Father to behave without customary propriety, disrupting his and others' sense of social place, Walker is also a textual impropriety who disturbs the reader's sense of historical appropriateness.[19] His anachronistic presence that interrupts the orderly sequence of historical events cannot be reconciled to a conventional linear model of history. Neither can Coalhouse Walker be reconciled to conventional methods of interpretation. His story is adapted from Heinrich von Kleist's 1808 novella, Michael Kohlhaas, and his intertextual status is emphatically different from that of the other characters, whether fictional or historical.[20]

---

[19] For a survey of reviews that attacked Ragtime as implausible history, as well as essays hostile to Doctorow's use of anachronism, see John Williams, Fiction as False Document: The Reception of E. L. Doctorow in the Postmodern Age (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), 24-28, 44-47.

[20] Jameson rightly criticizes Linda Hutcheon's treatment of Coalhouse Walker as too easy when she, like many other readers of the novel, responds to Ragtime's invitations to discern an explanatory design that would explain the apparently significant parallels linking some characters to others. Hutcheon tries to equalize the parallels between Walker and other characters but, in doing so, overlooks his strategic difference when she writes that the "black

Walker's intertextual status is essential to Doctorow's critique of the ideological foreclosure of the narrative end. His narrative trajectory links the trajectories of the other primary characters, bringing them to a resolution. But Walker's intertextuality also deflects the ideological force of Ragtime's apocalyptic climax. His escalating violence fosters expectations of redemptive significance through apocalyptic closure yet, as Christopher Morris argues, that narrative portentousness is deflated when Walker's revolt is interpreted intertextually, as a repetition of Kleist's story, itself a representation of a historical moment of failed insurrection (105-06). But, even though Coalhouse is a replication of Kohlhaas, that repetition is not a "pointless" one. Unlike the other primary characters, Walker is the only character in Ragtime who (with Sarah) is never presented with any irony. His story is rendered as unambiguously tragic, suggesting a revised tragic apocalypse within the larger comic frame of Ragtime. What puts the inevitable into play in this revised tragic apocalypse

---

Coalhouse, the white Houdini, the immigrant Tateh are all working class, and because of this--not in spite of it--all can therefore work to create new aesthetic forms (ragtime, vaudeville, movies)" (A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction [New York and London: Routledge, 1988], 61-62). For a critic who praises Ragtime and other postmodern texts for invariably "problematizing" their subject's claims to authority, this simple equation that glosses over the emphatic differences in the ontological status of Walker, Houdini, and Tateh is surprising. Jameson objects to the smooth facility of this reading, stressing that the three characters are incommensurable: "Houdini being a historical figure, Tateh a fictional one, and Coalhouse an intertextual one" (Postmodernism 22). Furthermore, while each man does indeed partake in the creation of new aesthetic forms informed by working-class sensibilities and realities, Hutcheon's valorization of that participation seems rather beside the point: Walker may be a gifted piano player of ragtime music, but he is gunned down by police bullets; Tateh may be a talented movie director, but his success follows his renunciation of the labor movement.

is not a higher cause, as embodied in Providence, Necessity, or History, but human error and stupidity and the social evils of racism and intolerance. The focus, therefore, is on human action and inaction, on the human responsibility to make history rather than to regard it as already made. In revising the assumptions of tragic apocalypse, Ragtime opens the horizon of historical possibility, suggesting that the anachronistic Coalhouse Walker can therefore be understood as a repetition from the past and, in a sense, from the future that radically displaces the triumphal continuity assumed by apocalyptic history.

After Walker is gunned down, the narrative changes tempo as if now suddenly impatient to arrive at the end. In the final chapter Doctorow indicates how the end is an object of desire when he presents another end, Father's death by drowning, as a fantasy of fulfillment:

> Poor Father, I see his final exploration. He arrives at the new place, his hair risen in astonishment, his mouth and eyes dumb. His toe scuffs a soft storm of sand, he kneels and his arms spread in pantomimic celebration, the immigrant, as in every moment of his life, arriving eternally on the shore of his Self. (269)

Father has achieved the moment of absolute stasis that Freud speculated is the goal of the drive toward the end. But the present progressive tense--"arriving eternally"--indicates that this is a fantasy whose completion remains forever delayed except in death, and even the stability of that apocalyptic fulfillment is also rendered questionable. What Morris describes

as Ragtime's "Hollywood ending" (110) is next also offered as a fantasy of completion. In four short sentences covering one calendar year Tateh courts Mother and proposes marriage, effortlessly overcoming the sturdy boundaries of class and ethnicity that much of Ragtime has emphasized. Tateh and Mother then seemingly miraculously achieve the American Dream when they "go West" with the three children "to start a new happy life" in the California sunshine (Jones 21):

> They lived in a large white stucco house with arched windows and an orange tile roof. There were palm trees along the sidewalk and beds of bright red flowers in the front yard. One morning Tateh looked out the window of his study and saw the three children sitting on the lawn. Behind them on the sidewalk was a tricycle. They were talking and sunning themselves. His daughter, with dark hair, his tow-headed stepson and his legal responsibility, the schwartze child. He suddenly had an idea for a film. A bunch of children who were pals, white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds, mischievous little urchins who would have funny adventures in their own neighborhood, a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and getting out again. (269-70)

Ragtime's concluding paragraph, however, is a highly ambiguous ending: it both affirms the rags-to-riches story of successful individualism that the dominant ideology promotes but also calls that ideology into question through its ironic tone and parodic method. For after this

description of the happy family comes the information that Emma Goldman was deported, Evelyn Nesbit fell into obscurity, and Harry Thaw marched annually in Newport's Armistice Day parade.

Closure and the Utopian Fantasy of the End

Because the final page seems to correct the initiatory lack in the panorama that begins Ragtime, many critics have interpreted Doctorow's ironic "happy ending" as the successful closure to what Douglas Fowler, for example, regards as "a family and national Bildungsroman--an account of the nature of the American national character and the transformation of its identity" (58). With similar assumptions, John Parks maintains that the "family serves also as a kind of metaphor for [Doctorow's] vision of American culture. It is an image that can bring together disparate cultural elements into an inclusive whole while not destroying American multiplicity" (16). Thus the "marriage of Tateh and Mother at the end represents a new historical composition, which points to a pluralistic American future" (69). Paul Levine also sees the new family "as a symbol of our connectedness even in the midst of our great differences" (61). In his reading, Ragtime's ending is an embodiment of "the transformation of American society from small-town WASP homogeneity to big-city ethnic heterogeneity. The immigrants and Negroes who were excluded from American reality at the

beginning of the novel have by the end become part of the family" (54-55). But by overlooking the destabilizing nature of Doctorow's irony, these readings of the novel's ambiguous conclusion are themselves symptomatic of the comforting assurances offered by the dominant ideology when they accept one of its most powerful ideologemes: the family.

Traditionally regarded as a stable unit of historical continuity, the family is conventionally represented as both inhabiting and constituting a private space separate from the public, thus rendering it oddly ahistorical and impervious to the real inequalities and inequities of history. Yet Ragtime reveals how the powerful sentimentalism evoked by the family rhetoric disguises unequal power relations and, simultaneously, works to maintain them. American imperialism, for example, presents itself as a benign paternalism. When Peary tells Father the Eskimo are "children and they have to be treated like children," Father agrees. "He recalled an observation made in the Philippines ten years before where he had fought under General Leonard F. Wood against the Moro guerillas. Our little brown brothers have to be taught a lesson, a staff officer had said, sticking a campaign pin in a map" (62). An equally contemptuous paternalism also treats workers as children--but only when those workers are not actual children, who are treated with a nonsentimental and often deadly calculation:

> Those fortunate enough to have jobs were dared to form unions. Courts enjoined them, police busted their heads, their leaders were jailed and new men took their jobs. A union was an affront to God. The laboring man would

> be protected and cared for not by the labor agitators, said one wealthy man, but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom had given the control of the property interests of this country. (33-34)

With similar assumptions about the historically rightful superiority of his class and race, Father "thought, for instance, there was no reason the Negro could not with proper guidance carry every burden of human achievement" (194). Doctorow's parody of this paternalist rhetoric warns the reader to view Ragtime's consoling final image of the happy family with suspicion and, instead, to regard it, as Harter and Thompson do, as "ironically compos[ing] a microcosm of the melting pot always promised but never achieved" (53).

The ambiguity of Ragtime's choice of closure suggests how triumphal history omits the victims of history in order to establish its continuity. A reading of the novel's ending as unambiguously inclusive must necessarily disregard or minimize the events that allow the formation of this ideal family: Tateh abandons Mameh and later also abandons the Lawrence strike; Sarah is brutally injured and soon dies, and Coalhouse Walker is murdered by police bullets; Grandfather conveniently dies; Younger Brother is killed in Mexico while fighting with Zapata; and Father drowns with the sinking of the Lusitania. The final chapter is chockablock with fortuitous deaths. Moreover, this new family repeats the principle of exclusion evoked in Ragtime's opening pages. Mother may have married a Jewish socialist from Latvia, but she has not relinquished her WASP privilege. Instead, Tateh has risen to her world through his wealth. Unlike Mameh, she remains comfortably insulated by her class and,

unlike Sarah, she will not have to labor. Furthermore, while Tateh's replacement of Father follows the conventions of the classical historical novel, in which the obsolete values embodied by one character are vanquished by the progressive values of another, Doctorow's parody renders the progressive value of that replacement decidedly ambiguous. Ragtime is pointedly ambivalent about whether Tateh's abandonment of his socialist values can be regarded as progress. His success, like Ford's, is due to his recognition of the "value of the duplicable event" (111), and the novel's eighteenth chapter virtually equates Tateh with Ford.[21]

To describe the ending of Ragtime as a cultural fantasy, however, does not diminish its significance. Encouraging his readers to desire the narrative end, Doctorow then implicates

---

[21] Angela Hague provides a compelling argument that Tateh's new career as a film-maker "allows him to remain philosophically entrenched in the working class" (104). She argues that he represents such historic men as Carl Laemmle, William Fox, and Adolph Zukor--all Jewish immigrants who, as independent producers, broke the monopoly of film companies dominated by American-born businessmen and transformed the movie industry. Using Walter Benjamin's ideas about film's potential ability to threaten establishment values, Hague maintains that Tateh helps to create a new mass medium that, because it demolishes the distinctions between high and popular culture, is inherently democratic ("Ragtime and the Movies," North Dakota Quarterly 50 [1983]: 101-12). However, although she is careful not to understate Baron Ashkenazy's enthusiastic embrace of capitalist values, Hague does underestimate Ragtime's insistent warnings about the seductive power of ideological fantasy (as when, for example, Emma Goldman writes to Evelyn Nesbit: "I am often asked the question How can the masses permit themselves to be exploited by the few. The answer is By being persuaded to identify with them. Carrying his newspaper with your picture the laborer goes home to his wife, an exhausted workhorse with the veins standing out in her legs, and he dreams not of justice but of being rich" [71]). Lary May's Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980) discusses how the fledgling movie industry was soon regarded as a possible means of social control in its perceived potential ability to bring "desire to rest," as a 1916 study by Harvard professor of psychology Hugo Münsterberg argued (cited in May 42).

them for participating in the ideological construction of the happy family whose inclusive features erase still present social contradictions, and whose effortless and even seemingly magical formation fosters a strategic amnesia about the victims of history. That consoling fantasy, the novel suggests, is what awaits us at the dominant ideology's narrative of the end of history: an end that rewards workers like Tateh, who relinquish their political principles of social equity, and also affirms women like Mother, who accept their passive role in history; it is an end, moreover, that must eradicate principled men like Coalhouse Walker who demand their unacknowledged rights and their unrecognized presence in history. Doctorow's narrative method of elaborate patterns of parallels and coincidences that both suggests and frustrates a total model of interpretation also educates its readers to be suspicious of the seductive allure of the end. Narrative closure, Ragtime stresses, is the crucial site of ideological foreclosure.

Revealing how ideology speaks to real human desires, Doctorow indicates how it can co-opt the drive for the end. Thus the novel also underscores how the end of narrative repetition, like the end of historical antagonism, remains an object of desire. Ragtime's ambiguous ending represents the longed for arrival at an ultimate stasis--the utopian end of individual desire and social contradiction--but its irony destabilizes the equilibrium promised by the dominant ideology's narrative of the end, suggesting that human desire will always remain unsatisfied and that history, therefore, will always remain uncompleted. As the Little Boy understands: "the world composed and recomposed itself in an endless process of dissatisfaction" (99). The end of history, Ragtime insists, is an endless and, in the best

meaning of the word, utopian goal. By demonstrating through its revisionary parody the value of the open horizon of the comic frame of history rather than the foreclosed horizon of the tragic, the novel stresses that the end of history is the goal of human agency rather than the working out or following through of an already established master plot of historical destiny or inevitability, and one which, Doctorow always reminds us, is the responsibility of individual humans to create rather than to passively await.

The Master Plot and the Deflation of the End: The Public Burning

In his fiction and drama, Robert Coover examines what he once described as "the universal fiction-making process": the mediating function of symbolic representations that attempt to explain and control the contradictions of experience by structuring them with narrative coherence and continuity (Ziegler and Bigsby 82). As with Doctorow's fiction, narrative closure is therefore often an object of critical scrutiny in Coover's; and much of his fiction, too, foregrounds the narrative end as an object of readerly desire and hence also as the potential site of ideological foreclosure. The short story "Klee Dead," from Pricksongs and Descants (1969), for example, denies the reader any pleasure in the dilatory area of narrative postponement and deferral by beginning at its narrative terminus: "Klee, Wilbur Klee, dies.

Is dead, rather. I know I know: too soon. It should come, after a package of hopefully ingenuous preparations, at the end" (104).[22] Like many of the stories collected in Pricksongs and Descants, the desire for the promised narrative moment of final revelation is thematized in Coover's first novel, The Origins of the Brunists (1966), which satirizes apocalyptic logic, and is emphasized metafictionally in The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop. (1968), whose final chapter obliges the reader to resolve Henry Waugh's historical chronicle of his baseball creations in a self-reflexive game of closure. Both early

---

[22] Many of the stories collected in Pricksongs and Descants are "exemplary fictions" (as Coover calls them) when they force the reader to acknowledge her own collusive desire in the construction of a stable narrative meaning--a textual certitude that is often "arrived at" in narrative death and the death of narrative. Jackson I. Cope begins his study of Coover's fiction by interpreting "The Leper's Helix" as an allegory of the reading process. In that story a narrative "we" runs along a helix toward a desired goal, yet the inevitability of the goal soon makes it an object of fear (Robert Coover's Fictions [Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986], 1-4). Paul Maltby also opens his discussion of Coover's texts with an allegorical reading of a story from Pricksongs and Descants. The importance of his analysis of the elaborate and violent television quiz show presented in "Panel Game" is his insistence that the story should not be read merely as a metafictional commentary on the literary process of signification but also (and more urgently) as a commentary on the power relations of the sociopolitical construction of authoritative meaning (Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon [Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1991], 82-84). Much of Maltby's argument, to which I will return below, is directed at the de-politicizing tendencies of those readings of The Public Burning that, taking their cue from Coover's words about the "universal fiction-making process," either read the novel as a satiric illustration of an anthropological need for a scapegoat ritual, or discuss its metafictional features as an extended discourse on epistemological questions about the nature of fact and fiction. In either approach, the disturbing fissures in the national narrative of historical election opened up by the real-life case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are neglected. What these discussions overlook, in other words, are the ways in which real power often uses narratives of history's end to justify its own immediate ends.

novels compel the reader to recognize that the reconciliation of contradiction and the stabilization of meaning at and by the end is not merely a narrative convention, but a convention that speaks to a utopian longing--and a longing, moreover, that can be textually manipulated and ideologically co-opted.

Many of Coover's other novels are especially interested in the nature of desire, its role in narrative momentum, and its powers of metamorphosis. Coover dedicates his recent John's Wife (1996) to Ovid and Angela Carter, quoting from the latter: "the world exists only as a medium for our desires . . . Nothing . . . is ever completed." In that novel, John's unnamed wife remains an ambiguous object of desire whose simple narrative function is to animate the complexly interconnected trajectories of the text's many and various characters. The novel ends with a resonant word followed by an ellipsis, invoking the unfinished past yet to be redeemed in the future: "Once . . . " (428). In Ghost Town (1998), the distant object, a prairie town on the far horizon, is both never arrived at and arrived at too late. Desire in this novel does not so much remain unfulfilled; rather, the novel's cowboy protagonist is literally left behind at the end to begin, once again, where he started. Like Ghost Town, Briar Rose (1996) emphasizes narrative desire, the drive for the end, in its extended play on the notion of the potentially endless seriality of narrative; and, like Pinocchio in Venice (1991), Briar Rose reworks an old tale to examine the privileged moment of narrative stasis: in both novels, the narrative of a thwarted death becomes the delayed death of narrative. The reader, like the two novels' protagonists, is compelled to consider why the end should be an object of desire.

Briar Rose is typical of how most of Coover's fiction is not only particularly fascinated with narrative desire, but also seeks to inculpate the reader's drive for the expected end. Spanking the Maid's (1982) parody of pornography's repetitive promises of the apocalyptic climax implicates the reader's desire to arrive at the satisfying end; and Gerald's Party (1986) foregrounds, in a literal fashion, the violence that often accompanies the textual drive for the end. Suspicious of the finality of the end, the assumption that all that need be said has been said, Gerald's Party concludes, as much of Coover's fiction does, with an invitation to the reader to recognize her own participation in the construction of the text's pointedly arbitrary resolution: "c'mon, lets try that again! From the beginning!" (316).[23]

That invitation to refashion the end is implicit in The Public Burning's challenge to the reader to re-vision the narrative of history. In its extravagant presentation of the ways in which the Rosenbergs' conviction and execution on the charge of conspiracy to commit espionage functioned to reinforce the dichotomies of Cold War discursive power, Coover's novel examines the predatory nature of the dominant ideology's claims to the mastery of history. Executed in 1953 at the height of early Cold War hysteria, the Rosenbergs remain, in John Strand's words, "unquiet ghosts" who continue to haunt cultural memory. The

---

[23] In his discussion of A Night at the Movies, a 1987 collection of short stories that also examines the potentially infinite nature of narrative and narrative desire, Pierre Joris concludes that here, too, Coover rejects the tragic frame of apocalyptic history in favor of the comic. "In an open universe," Joris writes, "the apocalypse can only be local, limited, and therefore bereft of final, eschatological meaning" ("Coover's Apoplectic Apocalypse or 'Purviews of Cunning Abstractions,'" Critique 34 [Summer 1993]: 230).

Rosenberg case not only confirmed the split among a population already polarized by McCarthyite divisions, it also splintered the American left.[24] It still remains what Virginia Carmichael's study of representations of the Rosenbergs in fiction, drama, and the visual arts emphasizes as "an unresolved breach in the national narrative of moral purpose" (xiii).[25]

---

[24] "Unquiet Ghosts" is the title of Strand's review of the Rosenberg Era Art Project's exhibit "Unknown Secrets," which included fifty-seven single and multi-media works about the Rosenbergs as well as a companion book, The Rosenbergs: Collected Visions of Writers and Artists, ed. Rob A. Okun (New York: Universe, 1988), and the unquiet memories the exhibit aroused when it first opened in 1988. The exhibit was immediately attacked by Hilton Kramer and then George Will as anti-American. (See John Strand, "Unquiet Ghosts," Museum & Arts Washington January/February 1991: 22-25.) Citing this important exhibit, Virginia Carmichael notes a renewed interest in the Rosenberg case during the 1980s and suggests that it was in part a response to the revived Cold War rhetoric of the Reagan and Bush administrations (Framing History: The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War [Minneapolis and London: U Minnesota P, 1993], xviii-xxi).

Numerous books argue either for or against the Rosenbergs' guilt. Among the former are Louis Nizer, The Implosion Conspiracy (New York: Doubleday, 1973), which Coover attacked in the New York Times Book Review, 11 February 1973, 4-5; and H. Montgomery Hyde, The Atom Bomb Spies (New York: Atheneum, 1980). Among the latter are William A. Reuben, The Atom Spy Hoax (New York: Action Books, 1955), which is based on Reuben's series of articles first published in the National Guardian; and Walter Schneir and Miriam Schneir, Invitation to an Inquest (New York: Doubleday, 1965), and revised (New York: Pantheon, 1983). Perhaps the most thorough history of the Rosenberg case is Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983), whose Bibliographical Note discusses the reliability of FBI documents, and whose 1997 second edition provides new information that, they believe, proves beyond a doubt Julius Rosenberg's involvement in espionage (see the following note). The most moving history of the Rosenberg case and its aftermath is their sons' memoir, Robert Meeropol and Michael Meeropol, We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), and revised (Urbana: U Illinois P, 1986).

[25] More than four decades after their execution, the question of the Rosenbergs' guilt or innocence continues to elude a final answer. In their introduction to the 1997 second edition of The Rosenberg File, Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton present new information provided

---

by a post-Soviet Russia that they argue confirms their previous conclusion that Julius Rosenberg was indeed involved in espionage: "far from being a political dissenter prosecuted for his espousal of peace and socialism, Julius Rosenberg was an agent of the Soviet Union, dedicated to obtaining military secrets" (xxiii). Radosh and Milton cite the 1990 second edition of Nikita Kruschev's memoirs which state that Kruschev overheard Vyacheslav Molotov tell Joseph Stalin that "the Rosenbergs had vastly aided production of our A-bomb" and "they provided very significant help in accelerating the production of our atom bomb" (xi). Kruschev's memories are supported, they add, by Molotov's tape-recorded recollections about his own assumptions that the Rosenbergs were involved in atomic espionage for the USSR. Furthermore, they continue, Soviet scientists who had defected to the United States identified to Ronald Radosh two top Soviet military scientists, native speakers of English, as associates of David Greenglass and Julius Rosenberg who had disappeared after the arrests of Greenglass and Rosenberg. One of the pair, Joel Barr, was in the Soviet Union a pioneer in microelectronics under the name Joseph Berg and who, after returning to the US in 1992, then told his story on an hour-long special program of ABC's Nightline. Radosh and Milton also note that in 1995 former Soviet spy-master Anatoli Yakovlev (or Yatskov) told the Washington Post that, in addition to Klaus Fuchs, there was another important spy involved with Los Alamos, and confirmed that Harry Gold was a courier. They also relate how in 1997 two journalists interviewed a Soviet man who claimed to be the person who "handled" Julius Rosenberg; the former handler explained in detail how Julius stole a proximity fuse from a factory where he worked in 1944. Finally, Radosh and Milton present as conclusive evidence the National Security Agency's "Venona" transcripts of intercepted and decrypted telegrams sent to and from Soviet diplomatic missions within the US that, they assert, both confirm their original suspicion of Julius's guilt and also indicate that Ethel was aware of her husband's activities. See Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, The Rosenberg File 2nd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1997): ix-xxx. See also the discussion of the transcripts of the decoded Venona messages that identify by name both Ethel Rosenberg and Ruth Greenglass in John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1999): 295-311.

Yet some, maybe even much, of this evidence is based on hearsay as well as murky spy identities and possibly self-serving memories. And the strongest proof, the Venona transcripts, has been denounced by the Rosenbergs' sons, Robert and Michael Meeropol, as "cooked" by the NSA and the CIA (on the latter charge and its refutation see Radosh and Milton, The Rosenberg File, 2nd ed., xxi). I doubt that the Rosenberg case will ever be satisfactorily closed, even if irrefutable evidence were found to prove Julius and Ethel Rosenberg either incontrovertibly guilty or innocent. Few would deny, however, that their case was manipulated by government officials and agencies to serve specific political interests-

The resistance of the Rosenbergs' story to closure indicates a historical trauma that reveals the inadequacy, and even the moral bankruptcy, of Cold War claims to the proprietary stewardship of world history. That resistance to closure provides Coover with an opportunity to scrutinize the dominant ideology's assertion of a universal history and also allows him to identify its complicity with the potentially literal apocalyptic end of history--nuclear war--that Cold War logic simultaneously threatened and claimed to avert. The Public Burning takes advantage of the "unresolved breach in the national narrative of moral purpose," moreover, to confront its reader with the ethical challenge to participate in the construction of history: to recognize, in other words, that the end of history is not a fixed point above or beyond the reach of human agency. Coover's novel stresses that any ideology is never monolithic and that within the discontinuities of any interpellative process resides the possibility for critical historical agency.

-the focus of Coover's The Public Burning.

Plots, Counterplots, and the Iron Laws of History

Considered by Coover as a dissenting "contribution to America's bicentennial celebration" of 1976, The Public Burning examines, in Daniel Frick's words, "the propelling fiction of America's dominant culture: that it is a divinely chosen nation" (83-84). Early in the Prologue the apocalyptic telos of the dominant ideology is invoked as preordained necessity, as a millennial end of history that is not merely desirable but inevitable. It is, moreover, the natural outcome of a supposedly irresistible plot that must therefore eradicate those, like Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, whose alleged treachery threatens its foregone conclusions. They are therefore positioned as the monstrous agents of a counterplot whose deviant trajectory must be contained and controlled, even by violence:

> as General George Washington himself . . . once put it: "No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency!" This was true then, it is true now. Throughout the solemn unfolding of the American miracle, men have noticed this remarkable phenomenon: what at the moment seems to be nothing more than the random rise and fall of men and ideas, false starts and sudden brainstorms, erratic bursts of passion and apathy, brief setbacks and

> partial victories, is later discovered to be--in the light of America's gradual unveiling as the New Athens, New Rome, and New Jerusalem all in one--a necessary and inevitable sequence of interlocking events, a divine code, as it were, bringing the Glad Tidings of America's election, and fulfilling the oracles of every tout from John the Seer and Nostradamus to Joseph and Adam Smith. The American prophet S.D. Baldwin summed it up in a nutshell in the title of his 1854 classic: Armageddon: or the Overthrow of Romanism and Monarchy; the Existence of the United States Foretold in the Bible, Its Future Greatness; Invasion by Allied Europe; Annihilation of Monarchy; Expansion into the Millennial Republic, and Its Dominion over the Whole World. All Incarnations of Uncle Sam have noticed this and been humbled by it, and Dwight Eisenhower, the newest, is no exception. (8-9)

Ideological certitude and ideological paranoia are simultaneously conjured, suggesting that the dominant ideology is not a seamless system but one, as The Public Burning elaborates, that requires a counter-ideology, an irrepressible counterplot, in order to maintain the hegemony of its own determinist narrative neatly summarized in Baldwin's lengthy title. Thus Coover's Rosenbergs must be executed as ideological antagonists in order to maintain the coherence of the dominant ideology: they represent the threat of an internal difference that the

system, in trying to uphold its fantasy of cultural unity, political continuity, and historical identity, seeks to disown but can never wholly erase.[26]

---

[26] In her analysis of the Cold War habit of linkage (in which an individual or group is linked to communism in a chain of equivalences or a series of associations), Carmichael emphasizes how the obsessive identification of internal difference within a system that projects all contradiction onto an evil Other is a limitless operation (38-39). The potentially infinite nature of linkage therefore meant that "naming names" was not a means to an end but soon became an end in itself, as Victor Navasky makes clear in his discussion of the HUAC hearings in Hollywood and elsewhere (Naming Names [New York: Viking, 1980]).

The Rosenbergs' function in Cold-War America's definition of itself as both history's custodian and the embodiment of its future endpoint is analogous to the "hysteric relation" of anti-Semitism to its object examined by Vincent Pecora, whose discussion I rely upon here. Arguing that the Holocaust needs to be understood as "an uncanny episode in the enlightened West's need to define itself against its others," Pecora writes: "The Aryan racist had convinced himself that, beyond the uniqueness of his own blood line, the fate of civilization itself in the West rested on his shoulders. In a sense, the 'singularity' of the 'Final Solution' becomes a revealing problem only to the extent that it is understood to be inseparable from the West's own conception of itself as a singular and privileged culture of reference" ("Habermas, Enlightenment, and Antisemitism," in Saul Friedlander, ed., Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution" [Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1992], 167).

Although I believe it is wrong to conclude that the Rosenbergs, like the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis, were executed "simply" as ritual scapegoats (a reductive and ahistorical argument that Pecora avoids), it is important to note that such an argument was made during the Rosenbergs' trial and after their conviction. Anti-Semitism did accompany the Rosenbergs' trial, conviction, and execution: Radosh and Milton report that many American newspapers and Jewish organizations received anti-Semitic letters and poems, and the Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case kept a file of similar hate mail. While such gutter-language cannot be dismissed, more noteworthy are the ways in which the Rosenbergs' death sentence--a punishment in stark and disturbing contrast to the sentence of fourteen-years imprisonment that Klaus Fuchs received in Britain--led to charges both in the United States and abroad that the Rosenbergs were the scapegoats of a corrupt system. Many in France, for example, where the uneasy boundaries between Nazi collaboration and noncollaboration were being drawn and still again redrawn, saw the case as a repeat of the Dreyfus affair. The Communist Party also charged that the Rosenbergs were hostages to American imperialism, fascism, and anti-Semitism; Howard Fast even suggested that because

Because the dominant ideology, in order to define itself, requires a counter-ideology which it must necessarily demonize, but upon which it must also rely in order to establish its authority, Coover suggests an analogy between McCarthyism and Stalinism.[27] Hence the symmetries that abound in The Public Burning. Coover presents, for example, the nondescript Willi Goetling, a historic victim of super-power posturing who is executed in East Berlin on trumped-up charges of treason, as the equivalent of the drab and mediocre Julius Rosenberg, an equally unassuming man judged guilty of "premature anti-fascism" (101)--a disturbing charge that, like the notorious Soviet practice of revisionism (as when Trotsky is summarily erased from archival documents), assumes a properly predetermined progression of the historical plot. In similar fashion, the novel's Prologue repeatedly suggests a parallel between Stalin's USSR and McCarthy's USA. While Billy Graham thunders from his pulpit that

---

they were tried by a Jewish prosecuting attorney in a court presided over by a Jewish judge, the Rosenbergs were victims of a government conspiracy. Many versions of the latter argument, moreover, were made in the wake of the show trial of Rudolf Slansky and thirteen other defendants in Czechoslovakia--a purge of the Czech Communist Party of its Jewish leadership that resulted in eleven executions--which necessitated diversionary attention to the Rosenbergs' case (about which the Party had previously been silent). See Radosh and Milton, The Rosenberg File, 2nd ed., 347-60; and John F. Neville, The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War (Westport and London: Praeger, 1995), 91-104.

[27] That any discourse claiming to speak the truth requires a strategic Other which it must exclude by definition but upon which it must also rely in order to establish its legitimacy is the central insight of Michel de Certeau's theory of knowledge (Heterologies: Discourse on the Other, trans. Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1986]).

"Communism is a fanatical religion," the nation hunkers down in paranoid vigilance--a paranoia that mirrors the tactics of its ideological enemy: "Private travel into Phantom-land is simultaneously banned and infiltration from abroad is blocked, J. Edgar Hoover's budget is increased, and Senator Harley Kilgore of West Virginia drafts a bill to 'grant the FBI war emergency powers to throw all Communists into concentration camps!'" (11). "How did it happen?" asks the Prologue and, as if to emphasize the parallels between the two ideologies, the text resorts to the literal-minded symmetries of Us versus Them: "The score in the middle of the decade is 1,625,000,000 people for Uncle Sam, only 180,000,000 for the Phantom . . . And yet, suddenly, by the end of the decade, the Phantom has a score of 800,000,000 to Uncle Sam's 540,000,000 and the rest--about 600,000,000 so-called neutrals--are adrift" (13-14). As if this insistent parallelism were not enough, Coover then offers yet one more example of the similarities shared by Cold-War America and Cold-War Soviet Union, but this time visually in his symmetrical reproduction of one of Time's pontifications:

it

was a

sickening and

to americans almost

incredible history of men so

fanatical that they would destroy

their own countries & col

leagues to serve a

treacherous

utopi

a.

(24)

Coover's textual symmetry not only foregrounds the ideological interdependence of Cold-War America and Soviet Union but also the structural reliance of the national ideology on a counter-ideology for its coherence and cohesion. As The Public Burning's presentation of the archival testimony insists, Cold-War America's obsessive language of providence and destiny was more than a sanctimonious rhetoric. What was at stake was not only the expanding Soviet empire, but the threat that expansion posed to the narrative telos of the dominant ideology. When the USSR, the threatening Other, is revealed to be the US's necessary structural counterpart, the sanction of America's exceptional status collapses and the manifest destiny of American imperialism, whether political, military, cultural, or corporate, becomes uncertain.

The crucial insistence on the inexorable "Laws of History," moreover, characterizes The Public Burning's Cold-War America as much as it characterized Stalin's Soviet Union. The political philosopher Hannah Arendt, in The Origins of Totalitarianism (written during the expanding powers of the House Un-American Activities Committee--a fact not lost on its author), argues that the seemingly irrefutable logic of totalitarianism is its much vaunted

submission to the supposed iron laws of Nature, Necessity, and History. "It is the monstrous, yet seemingly unanswerable claim of totalitarian rule," she writes, "that, far from being 'lawless,' it goes to the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation, that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to these suprahuman forces than any government ever was before" (461). By appealing to an infallible progression of history unmediated by the haphazard and necessarily contingent powers of human will or action, individuals can thus be juridically incarcerated or (even extrajudicially) executed for the crime of missing the train of history, a metaphor not only exploited by the real-life political campaigns of President Eisenhower and Vice-President Nixon but also repeated throughout The Public Burning.

One consequence of this fetishization of the supposedly iron laws of history is that what might have been regarded as matters of private belief or practice comes under intense public scrutiny. The peculiar logic of accusation and confession that characterized Stalin's show trials also dominated the hearings of HUAC and other official committees: the voice of private conscience is disallowed in public rituals of loyalty and accusation (what Victor Navasky calls "patriotic lying" [14]), and individual allegiance is disavowed in public rites of boundary-setting and purification. The result is an ever more vigilant scrutiny not just of actions but also of thoughts and even "tendencies."[28] Furthermore, once history is promoted

---

[28]For a discussion of how the implementation of the 1940 Smith Act (Alien Registration Act), which made it a crime to advocate the violent overthrow of government or conspire to do so,

as an unfolding of preordained events, agency is denied, becoming instead a matter of obedience or disobedience. In The Public Burning political leaders are therefore the custodians of History rather than participants in the construction of history. Coover's Eisenhower is not a president required to make difficult decisions; instead, his office is that of a public guardian of national myths whose duty is to facilitate their already known proper narrative ending: "Neither a wise man nor a brave man," says the novel's president, "lies down on the tracks of history to wait for the train of the future to run over him!" (240). Like the historic Eisenhower's refusal to grant clemency to the Rosenbergs on the grounds of a higher

---

as well as the many and various loyalty programs that soon followed the Smith Act, punished not only acts of association but also ideas and even perceived potential thoughts, see David Caute, The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 25-158; and Richard M. Fried, Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), 37-119.

Stressing that Joseph McCarthy was the first demagogue in American history "who denounced no specific racial, ethnic, or religious group" as agents of a conspiracy working within the nation to undermine its destiny, Caute believes that one of the appeals of McCarthyite anticommunism was that it provided (and mandated) most citizens, regardless of their ancestry, the chance to prove their identity as "genuine" Americans by publicly espousing their faith in the narrative promoted by the dominant ideology (21). Like Coover, he suggests that anticommunism and its public rituals of accusation, humiliation, and punishment functioned both to unify the potentially volatile differences of a population still divided along racial, ethnic, and class lines and to reinforce the authority of an increasingly intrusive state. See, for example, his discussion of government persecution of members of the civil rights movement as subversive and anti-American (164-180) and the repeated attacks of state and business, under the guise of anticommunism, on organized labor and trade unions (349-400). As an epigraph to The Great Fear, Caute offers the words of Attorney General Tom Clark, spoken in 1948: "Those who do not believe in the ideology of the United States, shall not be allowed to stay in the United States." That the consequences of this official sentiment went beyond employment, passports, and citizenship laws is the import of The Public Burning.

law beyond the control of a single president, Coover's Eisenhower only claims to be endorsing and enforcing the authority of America's role as the victorious protagonist in the master plot of History.[29] But the dominant ideology, while appealing to what it maintains are the necessary historical trajectories of its narrative, must also, at the same time, disavow the closed nature of its narrative. That threat of a closed horizon is therefore displaced onto the

---

[29] The actual words of a statement by President Eisenhower released thirty minutes after the Supreme Court's final refusal to review the Rosenberg case indicate the reductive and often punitive logic of apocalyptic history. The Rosenbergs'"real" crime, according to this statement, was not limited to their alleged past acts of espionage; rather, their guilt extended to future as-yet-to-be-committed crimes: "by immeasurably increasing the chances of atomic war, the Rosenbergs may have condemned to death tens of millions of innocent people all over the world. The execution of two human beings is a grave matter. But even graver is the thought of the millions of dead whose deaths may be directly attributable to what these spies have done" (qtd. in J. Ronald Oakley, God's Country: America in the Fifties [New York: Dembner, 1986], 171). The future deaths of tens of millions hypothesized in one sentence become the already-dead innocent millions within the space of two more sentences--sentences (in both meanings of the word) that reinforce the Cold War narrative of an "unnegotiable plot strictly governed by an either/or closure," as Carmichael puts it (189). Furthermore, if the future is already known, then the extreme punishment of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg can therefore be justified in a cost-benefit understanding of history: the present execution of two human beings is a small price to pay in order to safeguard the lives (or pre-emptively avenge the future deaths) of tens of millions all over the world. Slavoj Žižek describes this view of history, like Michael André Bernstein, as the "perspective of the Last Judgement" in which "history occurs, so to speak, on credit," and further characterizes its weirdly retroactive justificatory logic as the defining feature of the Stalinist notion of history, which is "that of a victor whose final triumph is guaranteed in advance by the 'objective necessity of history'" (142-43). See also John Ramage's discussion of Coover's assault on the dominant ideology, in which he characterizes manifest destiny as "a backward looking set of beliefs which is used to justify any action." Despite its rhetoric of morality and deviancy, Ramage adds, "it is a completely amoral ethos which rests upon the unassailable, if worrisome, premise that whatever is, is right--so long as it is working to our advantage. Conversely, anything which thwarts us is wrong and most likely unreal" ("Myth and Monomyth in Coover's The Public Burning," Critique 23 [Spring 1982]: 54).

monstrous counterplot, becoming a distinguishing and stigmatized feature of its counter-ideology. In the words of a "found-poetry" conflation of six months of presidential speeches, the novel's Eisenhower appeals to an understanding of history as the struggle between the forces of an open yet already known victorious future--a freedom "managed" by big business--and the forces of a closed because unthinkable alternative future. Citizens are therefore urged to "choose" to obey the will of History:

> It is, friends, a spiritual struggle.
> And at such a time in history, we who are free
> must proclaim anew our faith; we are called as a people
> to give testimony in the sight of the world
> to our faith that the future shall belong to the free!
>
> History does not long entrust
> the care of freedom to the weak or the timid--
> we must be ready to dare all for our country!
> Human liberty and national liberty
> must survive against Communist aggression
> which tramples on human dignity;
> upon all our peoples and nations
> there rests a responsibility to serve worthily
> the faith we hold and the freedom we cherish

--which means essentially a free economy. (152-53)

Coover's Rosenbergs, therefore, are executed not only as individual enemies of the state, but also as agents (or dupes) of a threatening counterplot that would rewrite the proper sequence of history's future events. The originary crime that sets in motion the narrative of The Public Burning is their transgression from the nation's master plot, a transgression that destabilizes it by questioning the legitimacy of its version of history's ending. For, by allegedly passing "atomic secrets" to the Soviet Union, they undermined their country's claims to the mastery of history: possession of the atomic bomb means ownership of the future. In the words of Judge Irving Kaufman's sentence, also presented in the novel's prologue: "Indeed by your betrayal you undoubtedly have altered / The course of history to the disadvantage of our country!" (25, Coover's emphasis).[30]

---

[30] The logic of Judge Kaufman's sentence also indicates that the Rosenbergs' greater crime was to tamper with the proper course of history. By allegedly stealing the "secret" of the atomic bomb and passing it to the enemy, they had allowed the USSR to possess prematurely knowledge that American scientists predicted the technologically "primitive" Soviet Union should not yet have, therefore making them also responsible for the Korean War and, as in Eisenhower's statement, for the future deaths of millions. Charged with conspiracy to commit espionage, the Rosenbergs were, according to Judge Kaufman's sentence, guilty of a "crime worse than murder": "I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb years before our best scientists predicted Russia would perfect the bomb has already caused, in my opnion, the Communist aggression in Korea, with the resultant casualties exceeding 50,000 and who knows but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason. Indeed, by your betrayal you undoubtedly have altered the course of history to the disadvantage of our country" (qtd. in Carmichael, who reproduces most of the sentence, 69-71). See also Radosh and Milton, The Rosenberg File 2nd ed., 283-84, and, for a discussion of how secret that atom bomb "secret" was, as well as J. Edgar Hoover's sometimes illegal efforts to ensure that the prosecution, judge, media, and general public

Hence part of the Rosenbergs' crime is what is presented as their willful refusal or incomprehensible inability to follow the right plot. Even after their conviction, they are offered the hope of judicial leniency and even presidential clemency if they confess their misguided adherence to a counterplot. But they cannot, or will not, offer a narrative that will satisfy their official auditors--an inability to endorse the authority of the correct plot that, in the either/or logic of Cold War necessitarianism, has deadly consequences. As Peter Humm makes clear in his reading of the many narratives and counternarratives generated by the Rosenberg case, the real-life Rosenbergs could have saved themselves by reciting any number of variant versions of the same counterplot, and were encouraged to do so many times, when they were offered the hope of leniency in return for the story both the Justice Department and the FBI wanted to hear--a plot more artfully devised than neutrally discovered.[31] Humm

---

would believe that the "secret" was indeed a secret the Rosenbergs stole, 432-49.

[31] It was long suspected that the FBI had very little or no evidence against Ethel Rosenberg and that her arrest and then conviction were part of a plan to pressure Julius into confession and then, it was presumed, the naming of names. That the authorities were never certain of her guilt but nonetheless willing to allow Ethel to be executed as part of a program of psychological pressure and then imminent threat is revealed by Radosh and Milton, who cite an FBI memorandum written two days before the Rosenbergs' execution that lists the questions FBI agents were to ask Julius should he decide to talk at the last minute. Among those questions: "Was your wife cognizant of your activities?" (The Rosenberg File, 2nd ed. 416-17).

That the official explanation of the Soviet Union's historically "premature" possession of the atomic bomb required a great deal of retrospective narrative energy (J. Edgar Hoover, for example, always insisted on an "atomic spy ring" that proved to be a narrative actively constructed after the fact rather than an espionage plot simply discovered or uncovered) is forcefully argued by Carmichael in "Embedded Story," the second chapter of her study of the

stresses that the fiction at the center of the Rosenberg trial--and the necessarily interpretive nature of any trial in which judge or jury is asked to decide which narrative, either that of the defense or the prosecution, is more credible--was the necessarily constructed nature of many of the prosecution's exhibits. While photostats and facsimiles were accepted as legal evidence (most notoriously, the Jello package), the prosecutor showed one witness "a replica of the sheet of paper you had," and that replica was then duly entered into the court record as yet another authentic exhibit (qtd. in Humm 48). Humm's point is not so much to argue that the Rosenbergs were victims of an unfair trial, but to stress the already narrative and therefore "fictional" structure of the Rosenbergs' trial and the often fictive nature of the evidence. Rather than insisting on their innocence to the end, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg might have lived had they spun another tale, another plot, that accorded with J. Edgar Hoover's narrative of an internal conspiracy at home that coincided with an international conspiracy abroad--a subplot, as it were, of the nefarious counterplot of Communist world-supremacy that threatened the master plot of the dominant ideology. Instead, as Coover suggests, they were

---

various cultural and political representations of the Rosenberg case (49-121). The destructive and even monstrous nature of the backward-moving, omnivorous logic of Hoover's ever-expanding narrative of domestic subversion and internal conspiracy provides a real-life example of the damaging, because damning, logic of what Michael André Bernstein calls narrative backshadowing: the condemnation of those who "should have" recognized and followed the foregone conclusions of History's apocalyptic structure (16). Much of the guilt of Coover's Rosenbergs is their "perverse" and therefore also incriminating refusal to acknowledge the authority and finality of the foregone conclusions of their nation's narrative of history, a perversion for which they are punished by being eliminated.

caught in Uncle Sam's own behind-the-scene conspiratorial master plot: a plot to organize all of America in the production of an ideologically reassuring because poltically necessary national spectacle--a public burning. "Justice is entertainment," reasons Nixon (121).

Furthermore, while the prosecution told one story and the defense another, the Rosenbergs themselves worried that their story would be either rewritten or even summarily obliterated by the authority of official historiography's own narrative. Humm quotes one actual prison-letter to Ethel in which Julius reminded her of a scene in Maxwell Anderson's Mary of Scotland in which, he wrote, "Elizabeth tells Mary that she has seen to it that the history of her reign will be written as she orders her writers to put down the events although in fact they are untrue" (51). The dominant ideology's narrative of history, if it cannot altogether erase the memory of its victims in an effort at seamless coherence, will attempt to contain their destabilizing threat by positioning them as perverse antagonists in History's master plot.

Coover's Nixon, too, suspects the fictional structure of the Rosenberg trial when he regards it as one scene in the larger drama of American Destiny: "Applause, director, actors, script: yes, it was like--and this thought hit me now like a revelation--it was like a little morality play for our generation! . . . our initiation drama, our gateway into History! Or part of it anyway, for the plot was still unfolding" (119-20, Coover's emphasis).

> Who could tell what was on Uncle Sam's mind? Certainly it was very theatrical. There was the drama of a brother sending his big sister to the

> electric chair; the implied tragedy of the Rosenberg children who would be left orphans; the curious spectacle of Jews prosecuting and judging Jews, then accusing each other of tribal disloyalties; an almost Wagnerian scope to the prosecution's presentation, incorporating many of the major issues of our times, whether or not relevant to the crime charged; the sense throughout that this was clearly a struggle between the forces of good and evil . . . But there was more to it than that. Not only was everybody in this case from the Judge on down--indeed, just about everyone in the nation, in and out of government, myself included--behaving like actors caught up in a play, <u>but we all seemed moreover to be aware of just what we were doing and at the same time of our inability, committed as we were to some higher purpose, some larger script as it were, to do otherwise</u>. Even the Rosenbergs seemed to be swept up in this sense of an embracing and compelling drama, speaking in their letters of sinister "plots" and worldwide "themes" and "setting the stage" and playing the parts they had been--rightly or wrongly--cast for "with honor and with dignity." (117, emphasis added)

The resolution of that morality play is ideologically foreclosed. Earlier, Nixon had approved the Supreme Court's choice to "announce their decision whether to vacate the stay or not tomorrow at high noon. That's right, high noon, why the hell not. . . . let's face it, the delay heightens the drama, and as long as everything turns out well in the end, that's probably a

good thing" (74). As with the elaborately sustained but already known resolution of suspense in the movie High Noon (an important intertext of The Public Burning, in which Gary Cooper manfully walks to his shoot-out destiny in a town cowardly avoiding the threat posed by the imminent arrival of the menacing Miller gang), the suspense attending the court's decision is equally contrived but narratologically necessary. Just as High Noon's many shots of the long and vacant railroad tracks, as well as the insistent cuts to the clock inexorably ticking toward high noon, assure that the train will arrive at its terminus and the clock will strike twelve, The Public Burning suggests that the outcome of the Rosenberg trial and appeals is, despite the suspense, a foregone conclusion: the train of history will arrive at its terminus. Like the sketchily characterized Miller brothers in High Noon, whose only obvious evil is their blind loyalty to their wicked and mostly absent brother, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are positioned as ideological antagonists who, like the Miller gang, exhibit a perversely unquestioning allegiance to another plot--and another plot, moreover, that they, like the black hats in the traditional Hollywood western, do not foresee will be necessarily vanquished.[32]

---

[32] High Noon (1952) itself was conceived as a parable of HUAC's coercive tactics in Hollywood and the capitulation of the motion picture industry to its bullying, according to its scenarist Carl Foreman, who had been subpoenaed by the committee while the movie was in production and was later blacklisted (see Stephen Whitfield, The Culture of the Cold War, 2nd ed. [Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996] 146-49, and Margot Henriksen, Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age [Berkeley: U California P, 1997], 66-68; for a discussion of Foreman's appearance before HUAC, where he denounced his prior Communist Party membership but apparently no one else, see Navasky, 156-65). John Wayne, a member of the Hollywood Committee for the Re-election of Joe McCarthy, immediately understood the political implications of High Noon, calling it "the

Momentarily grasping the antagonistic function of the Rosenbergs in a larger ideological narrative, Coover's Nixon thus perceives a symmetry between himself and them: "We all probably went to the same movies, sang the same songs, read some of the same books. We were the Generation of the Great Depression. Now I was the Vice President of the United Sates of America. They were condemned to burn as traitors. What went wrong? Why was this necessary?" (143-44). Nixon sees Julius Rosenberg as his symmetrical other, the antagonist to his role as protagonist: "We were more like mirror images of each other, familiar opposites. Left-right, believer-nonbeliever, city-country, accused-accuser, maker-unmaker. I built bridges, he bombed them. A Talmud fanatic at age fourteen, Manifesto zealot at fifteen. He moved to the fringe as I moved to the center" (137). Only Julius, like Ethel, has fatally followed the wrong plot--an epiphany Nixon experiences while eating mashed potatoes: "In a very real sense, Julius Rosenberg was going to the electric chair because he went to City College of New York and joined the American Students Union when he was sixteen. If he'd come to Whittier instead and joined my Square Shooters, worn slouch sweaters and open collars with the rest of us, it wouldn't be happening. Simple as that" (185-86). Fervently believing in a distinctly crass version of the American Dream of material wealth ("every time I flicked a switch, adjusted a thermostat, started a car, boarded a plane,

---

most un-American thing I've ever seen in my life" (qtd. in Whitfield 149). The point to stress, however, is that Foreman should choose to express his protest in a Western, the most American of popular genres, suggesting how dissent against the system is often articulated in terms of the system: here, the language of manifest destiny.

walked through automatic doors, flushed a toilet, or watched a record drop on a turntable, I loved America more" [183]), Nixon views himself as the hero of the Horatio Alger myth of success and thus cannot comprehend why Julius Rosenberg, so apparently similar to himself, has failed to follow the same narrative trajectory:

> Rosenberg, on the other hand, had been born into a true Horatio Alger family, poor but honest, he should have made a fortune. He'd even sold penny candy on the streets during the Depression, earning as much as eighty cents a day. But somehow something went wrong. The boat did not come in. The rich patron with the sweet tooth did not materialize. There was no happy ending. (304)

Nixon, of course, places his faith in the narrative telos of the dominant ideology. "There's something," he muses, "that makes me want the happy ending" (48). "Years of debate and adversary politics had schooled me toward a faith in denouement, and so in cause and consequence. The case history, the unfolding pattern, the rewards and punishments, the directed life" (362-63). Linking his narrative train to History's, Coover's Nixon regards himself as a simultaneous product and agent of the nation's fate, as a Man of Destiny, when he contemplates the millennial slogan, Novus Ordo Seclorum: "Yes, this was what America was all about, I thought, this was the true revolution of our era--Change Trains for the Future!--and I was lucky enough to be alive just at the moment we were, for the first time, really getting up steam. It was our job now--it would be my job--to bring this new order of

the ages to the whole world. My boyhood engineering dreams were coming true!" (59). The personal narrative of the private Nixon parallels the public narrative of America's providential history--a self-flattering perspective embodied in the historic Nixon's Six Crises that is both encouraged and parodically undermined by the novel's structure of chapters alternating between Nixon's first-person narrative and the anonymous chronicler's omniscient narrative (Fogel 191; Walsh 339).

While the success of Coover's Nixon's is due to his self-serving ability to project his narrative plot onto the nation's, much of the fictional Ethel Rosenberg's crime, like Julius's, is her inability to follow the right plot. She cannot align her own trajectory to that of the master plot. The sixteen-year-old Ethel, for example, wonders while standing in the wings during a production of the prison-house The Valiant whether "going on with life at all means having to adopt one role or another" (104), a notion the aspiring singer and actor, believing in the national promise of self-determination, rejects--fatally, as the novel implies. The young Ethel argues with a cast member that "life is more open-ended than that" and is sexually assaulted in response: "he jammed her up against a wall in a dark doorway, dragged up her skirts, and pushed his knee into her crotch" (104). Her refusal to acknowledge closure makes her suspect, marking her as weak and therefore inviting violence. The convicted Ethel, however, is portrayed by the novel's anonymous chronicler as among those who are unnaturally sinister because she does acknowledge closure, but now the wrong one. She is among those who have "known for years that the Phantom has intended this role for them, and

they've been practicing. Ethel especially: for some time now she has ceased resisting and has taken the part on and made it her own" (98). Her deviance from the dominant trajectory marks her guilt. The fictional Ethel is punished for her misinterpretation of the supposedly open narrative road before her: having answered to one miscue, she has chosen the wrong heroine's plot. In the words of the fictional Nixon who often positions himself as a Hollywood hero and envisions alternative plots for Ethel and himself by attempting to seduce her with the magical kiss that will awaken her to the truth:

> She was like the heroines in all those musicals who starve and suffer unnoticed, until one night the star gets a sore throat and can't go on, and against the better judgment of the fat cigar-chewing manager, the heroine takes over, wins the hearts of millions. Only Ethel never took over. She wasn't there when the star got a sore throat. She married Julius Rosenberg, typed up spy notes, and got sentenced to the electric chair instead. What happens to us in life seems, in retrospect, inevitable. And much of it is, the main patterns anyway. (314)

Yet Nixon's momentary insight that there might be other possible plots and other possible narrative endings is quickly negated by his acquiescence to an ideologically determined narrative foreclosure: the predetermined norms of History's plot always interrupt his fantasies, making his imaginative recreations of the Rosenbergs' childhood in New York's Lower East Side, for instance, literally unthinkable. At such moments, the physical embodiment of the

dominant ideology, Uncle Sam, always pops up to bully him back to the assurances of Eisenhower's custodial view of America's role in world history.[33]

Narrative Excess, Contamination Anxieties, and Ideological Containment

To summarize my argument thus far: stories, tales, and plots, as well as the counterplots and counternarratives they rely on to establish their authority, recur throughout both the story of the Rosenbergs and The Public Burning's own narrative of the various elements of that case. As Rüdiger Kunow observes, "Coover's narrative is almost overdetermined with plots--real and imaginary. They are presented as the always-already-given within which the historical agents are shown as they act" (385). Coover foregrounds these plots to reveal how a dominant ideology will spend a good deal of symbolic energy trying to paper over real social antagonisms and political contradictions by promoting a narrative of national destiny that, in the case of Cold-War America, attempts to explain these

---

[33] Tom LeClair notes how The Public Burning's characters are initially presented as dualisms that generate metaphors of binary opposition; but Coover then implodes these oppositions to show how they are "reciprocally created figures of huge cultural and religious systems" (The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction [Urbana and Chicago: U Illinois P, 1989], 127). See also LeClair, "Robert Coover, The Public Burning, and the Art of Excess," Critique 23 (Spring 1982): 26, and Thomas Pughe, Comic Sense: Reading Robert Coover, Stanley Elkin, Philip Roth (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1994), 63.

contradictions as the consequence of an external threat.[34] The emphasis, therefore, is on the designation of strict boundaries (right and wrong, obedience and disobedience, native and alien, and so on) as well as their ultimately impossible policing. This boundary-setting, moreover, requires a counter-ideology against which the dominant ideology can define itself, and against which it can assert its mastery of history in order to affirm its social, political, and military hegemony. In The Public Burning the boundaries are between the master plot and its symmetrical opposite, the counterplot: deviating from the narrative trajectory of the former functions as proof of guilty pursuit of the latter.

In order to present the master plot of history as but one compelling narrative among possible others, The Public Burning relies on what Tom LeClair describes as Coover's "art of excess" and Larry McCaffery terms a "deliberate strategy of excess" (85) that challenges the authority of the dominant ideology's ownership of history's blueprint for the reconciliation of social contradictions. Coover offers an excess of historical material that, in the vocabulary of Cold War rhetoric, cannot be "contained" within the resolution of any single narrative. In the context of The Public Burning, furthermore, this excess represents the real historical contradictions that prevent an ideology's privileged narratives from ever providing a coherent

---

[34] This is what the radical historian William Appleman Williams, writing during the first decade of the Cold War, analyzed as the continuing legacy of a US foreign and domestic policy that, believing national prosperity and tranquility require a continual expansion of the country's frontiers into foreign markets, perpetually externalizes its own internal problems. The result is global interference, a rejigging of international law, and a continued race for military and technological supremacy. See The Tragedy of American Diplomacy, rev. ed., 1-13.

whole: in Žižekian terms, it designates the "kernel of the Real" that disrupts the ideological foreclosure operating in the closure of narrative history. Thus The Public Burning's metafictional features expose the foreclosure inhabiting realist narrative's claims to the adequate and veracious presentation of the facts, whether it be in the forms of the traditional novel and the spectacular Hollywood epic (whose golden age was the 1950s) or in the conventions of traditional history books and the popular press. Like Doctorow, Coover populates his fiction with historic people participating in actual events, but, unlike Doctorow, he does not fashion an elaborately plotted confrontation between factual persons and fictional characters. Instead, by insistently citing the real texts of the public record, Coover sticks to the archival evidence, and often stubbornly so. The Public Burning foregrounds the ideological processes by which some real historic events are raised to the indelible status of historical fact while other actual events are passed over in historiographic silence and thereby dismissed from the historic record as local happenstance or archival ephemera because they do not speak to or cannot be accommodated by the dominant ideological narrative.[35] Thus

---

[35] Arguing that postmodern novels such as Ragtime and The Public Burning are not a repudiation of historical representation but, instead, an interrogation of the politics of historical representation, Linda Hutcheon maintains that such novels typically reveal "a new self-consciousness about the distinction between the brute events of the past and the historical facts we construct out of them. Facts are events to which we have given meaning" (The Politics of Postmodernism [London and New York: Routledge, 1989], 57; see also Hutcheon's A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, 87-123). Brian McHale describes The Public Burning as a "postmodernist revisionist historical novel" but, while he does not neglect the political nature of Coover's textual method, his emphasis is on the ontological uncertainty generated by such texts (Postmodernist Fiction [London and New

Coover's Nixon, who is confused when confronted with the various disturbing textual gaps, documentary aporia, and sometimes dubious evidence of the Rosenberg case, wonders whether history is nothing but a more or less cohesive narrative frame of facts that suppresses other contradictory and competing data in order to achieve its coherence:

> What was fact, what intent, what was framework, what was essence? Strange, the impact of History, the grip it had on us, yet it was nothing but words. Accidental accretions for the most part, leaving most of the story out. We have not yet begun to explore the true power of the Word, I thought. What if we broke all the rules, played games with the evidence, manipulated language itself, made History a partisan ally? (136)

Nixon, however, is profoundly unnerved by his momentary insights when he acknowledges not only the partisan nature of a politically defined History, but also comes dangerously close to admitting its capacity to be manipulated by any powerful ideology, not just Soviet. Briefly entertaining the possibility that his nation, too, might be dominated by what it stigmatizes in others as the fettered thinking of ideology, Nixon almost recognizes that Cold-War America does not naturally or neutrally possess history's future. His short-lived willingness to qualify the truth-claims of ideology's narrative of history is only one example of how nearly all assertions in The Public Burning are invariably contested, contradicted, and undermined,

---

York: Routledge, 1987], 86-96).

suggesting an excess of motivations and perspectives that cannot be contained in one master plot but rather one that, as Carmichael observes, "overflows formal explanatory boundaries, making all the more evident the exclusionary nature and costs of purified cold war codes and systems of meaning" (174).

The Public Burning's emphasis on the excess of historical facts does not result in a simple retreat into historical relativism, however. Nor is Coover's presentation of an excess of narratives mere metafictional play at the level of the signifier.[36] Rather, the novel not only foregrounds the desire for a coherent and cohesive narrative but also examines how the drive for the end--what Nixon believes will inevitably be the happy ending--can be ideologically co-opted. An entire chapter is therefore devoted to the seemingly monolithic truisms maintained by the New York Times, which daily represents "that effort to reconstruct with words and iconography each fleeting day in the hope of discovering some pattern, some coherence, some meaningful dialogue with time" (191). Coover depicts each page of the newspaper as a stone and metal slab, a literal monolith, that presents an initially bewildering collage of narratives

---

[36] Raymond Mazurek arges that Coover's metafictional technique negates the power of The Public Burning's political content; for if history is only textual then Coover's presentation of history is merely one more text among others ("Metafiction, the Historical Novel, and Coover's The Public Burning," Critique 23 [Spring 1982]: 29-42). This argument, however, misconstrues Coover's method. I do not think that Coover regards history as a fictional text. Rather, our access to history is textual and is also, therefore, available to the mediations of ideology. The Public Burning accepts the narrativity of history as our necessary access to, and understanding of, the past and the future. Coover's argument lies elsewhere: he seeks a "better" narrative of history (see below), one that refuses the closed horizon of apocalyptic history in the tragic mode. See Maltby, Dissident Postmodernists, 99-100.

and images but nonetheless offers consolation in the cultural conformity that unifies the apparently disparate items and, moreover, unites its reader-supplicants into a national religious collectivity--a process parodied in the mock-religiosity of the text's prose:

> The Friday-morning commuters into the center gather, as is their ancient custom, before their great civic monument, The New York Times, there to commune with the latest transactions of the Spirit of History as made manifest in all the words and deeds of living and dying men fit to print. On great slabs of stone, lead, and zinc, words and pictures appear and disappear, different ones every day, different yet somehow reassuringly familiar. It is as though--the slabs seem to tell us--a certain conspiracy of purpose motivates the Spirit, even when perverse, bringing a kind of fragile episodic continuity to the daily debris of human enterprise. (188)

The reassurance provided by the Times is its determined and determining organization of the multiplicity of daily events into a pseudo-Hegelian master narrative of History's unfolding plot.

Yet Coover's interest in such institutions is not merely with their social function as custodians of reassuring cultural myths. The Public Burning's focus is on how the desire for narratives whose coherence asserts a closure to contradiction can be manipulated by those who claim the authority of a superior knowledge of history. Thus, in Coover's presentation, Time magazine does not even bother with the pretence of journalistic objectivity when it demands that Americans "'accept the thrust of destiny,' to go out and take over the world and

'create the first great American Century'" (321). Instead, it presents its "fakery in allegiance to the truth," as Clare Boothe Luce ("Mother Luce") puts it, as a courageous bulwark against an insidious moral rot at home and a political instability abroad that threatens the outcome of the master plot (320).[37] History is here not a process of haphazard actions, competing ideas, and contingent events; it is a fixed narrative with discernible laws under whose authority those who follow counterplots can and will be punished. Coover's Nixon even momentarily questions whether the Rosenbergs are more substantial as narrative antagonists in the master plot of History rather than as individual humans:

---

[37] John Neville concludes his study of the presentation of the Rosenberg case in the national press with the observation that there was no "conspiracy of silence" because "there was no need for one; the political mechanics of agenda setting, i.e., gatekeeping, had long ago excluded from mainstream publications exposés and press releases from radical sources and newspapers. . . . In a sense, the FBI and the Justice Department had framed the Rosenberg case for the news media before Julius Rosenberg was arrested" (141). One notable exception to the press's unquestioning acceptance of official versions of the case was William Reuben's series of articles in the National Guardian, a left-wing weekly. But these articles were neither acknowledged nor discussed in any other US newspapers, according to Neville, even when Reuben claimed to have new evidence that refuted some of the prosecution's case against the Rosenbergs. Harold Urey, a scientist on the prosecution witness list, was disgusted by the behavior of the press, telling a New York Times reporter who sought a quote from him: "I'm angry and alarmed at the terrible fear and hysteria that's sweeping all over America. What appalls me the most is the role the press is playing. The judge's bias is so obvious. I keep looking over at you newspapermen and there's not a flicker of indignation or concern. When are you going to stop acting like a bunch of scared sheep?" The Times did not report Urey's rebuke and neither did any of the other newspapers reporting the Rosenbergs' trial, except the Guardian (The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War, 53-64, 122-24).

> Which was real, I wondered, the paper or the people? In a few hours, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg would be dead, their poor remains worth less than that horseshit I'd stepped in, and the paper too could be burnt, but what was on it would survive. Or could survive, it was a matter of luck. Luck and human need: the zeal for pattern. For story. And they'd been seduced by this. If they could say to hell with History, they'd be home free. (305)

But no one, The Public Burning insists, can say to hell with History: not Nixon, not Eisenhower, not the Rosenbergs. In Coover's excess of narratives, History is not simply one story among many others, but one in whose ending the question of political and cultural authority is at stake.

Coover's method of excess also serves to reveal how Cold War contamination-anxieties indicate the internal difference that ideology tries, unsuccessfully, either to contain or disavow. Uncle Sam's rape of Nixon can be read as a representation of the violence of such containment. The scene provides a sort of poetic justice: as Daniel Frick notes, the shit-talking and leakage-obsessed Watergate bugger gets buggered (88).[38] "Iron

---

[38] In an argument that rests on the shaky equation of Coover with Nixon, Frick reads The Public Burning as symptomatic of posthistorical paralysis. Believing that Coover's Nixon is a textual "vehicle by which Coover confronts his marginalized cultural status as a writer of politically oppositional texts," Frick maintains that the rape represents a strategic attempt by Coover to erase his identification with Nixon. But this only serves to identify Coover even more with what he attacks: "The irony of this disturbing moment is that Coover's attempt to escape his double has brought him right back to Richard Nixon. For if the myths of the hegemonic culture are so firmly entrenched that the dissident artist can only reformulate them

Butt" Nixon is the butt of an elaborate joke already prepared for in Coover's choice of epigraphs that preface the text and in the various references throughout the novel to bodily orifices naively made by Nixon, a.k.a. "Anus" (50): "you had to listen to him [Uncle Sam] with every hole in your body" (81). But Uncle Sam's rape of Nixon also has credence as a commentary on the ever-expanding surveillance of internal difference in an effort at containment and control. Within this context of rigidly defined boundaries the scene emphasizes the "unnatural" symmetry between Cold-War America and Cold-War Soviet Union: "'You're no better than the Phantom!'" Nixon gasps as Uncle Sam penetrates him (531). The scene suggests the violence required to master the slippage between difference and identity. Alan Nadel, in his study of American Cold-War texts, Containment Culture, discerns "a complex narrative of Other and Same" that characterized both foreign and domestic policy (14). The central text of that policy is George Kennan's influential 1947 Foreign Affairs essay, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," which presents the Soviet menace in the unexamined metaphor of an uncontrolled, potentially contaminating, and powerful fluid that, if uncontained, threatens both American potency abroad and virility at home (16).[39] But,

---

through assertions of an authoritarian imagination, then Coover, even if only temporarily, is also a disciple of Uncle Sam" ("Coover's Secret Sharer? Richard Nixon in The Public Burning," Critique 37 [Winter 1996]: 82, 88-89).

[39] The Cold War narrative of containment, Nadel argues, "equated containment of communism with containment of atomic secrets, of sexual license, of gender roles, of nuclear energy, and of artistic expression" (5). One consequence of this equation was the conflation of "reds, pinks, and lavenders." The obsessive concern with national security meant that sexual

as also suggested by the vocabulary of fluid boundaries, seepage, and leakage, these Cold War texts "reveal repeatedly the need for and the inability to stabilize the distinctions between Other and Same" (20; see also Pughe 76). Throughout The Public Burning until his rape, Nixon has momentary glimpses of the "no-man's land" (136) that lies between the either/or logic of Cold War boundaries and increasingly wonders about the clear distinctions between protagonist and antagonist in the master plot of History. Concluding a sequence of ever more skeptical hypotheses beginning with "maybe," he even postulates that the Rosenbergs are "pawns in a Cold War maneuver that only Uncle Sam and/or the Phantom knew about" (370, emphasis added). Nixon's rape can thus be understood as Uncle Sam's containment of his doubts about the distinctions between Other and Same in a violent act of control for, at the end of the scene, the previously questioning Nixon is rendered abjectly submissive and obedient, feminized and infantalized--politically, socially, and culturally powerless, in other words.

---

boundaries also received intensified scrutiny and homosexuality was therefore demonized as another source of domestic weakness that sapped the nation of its masculine strength and moral vigor. In his discussion of the persecution of gays and lesbians during the early Cold War, John D'Emilio documents the anti-homosexual laws passed by the Eisenhower administration inaugurating a hunt for gays and lesbians in the military and federal bureaucracy that was soon followed by state and municipal anti-homosexual legislation and surveillance. These laws and policies shared with anticommunism the common metaphors of contamination, contagion, and pollution (Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970 [Chicago and London: U Chicago P, 1983], 41-49).

The dissolution of boundaries is the national ideology's nightmare, and the threatening powers of destabilization are therefore displaced onto the ideological Other. The Phantom, demonized by Uncle Sam as "the Creator of Ambiguities . . . whose known rule a warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions" (336), apparently causes the excited Times Square crowds to dissolve momentarily into "a single mindless seething mass" of orgiastic excess:

> Amid a crescendo of ticking clocks, mad diabolical laughter, shattering glass, and recurring notes of impending dooo-oom, the eidola of squatters and gooney birds, frat rats and dirt farmers, puritans, populists, and brainwashed vets rise now to intermingle with those of coffinmakers and craven cowards, desperadoes and draft dodgers! What is truth? What is perversity? In the nighttime of the people it's all one! (490-91)

What becomes necessary to overcome the dissolution of boundaries is not a diversionary mass spectacle, as in the Roman empire's mob-placating circus, but a public, mediating "event" that structures social reality by reasserting the narrative certainties of apocalyptic history.[40] Near the beginning of the public burning Uncle Sam tells the Times Square crowds: "<u>We stand at</u>

---

[40] In order to clarify my point that the public burning is not a diversion from reality but a spectacular affirmation of its ideological construction, it is worth repeating Žižek's definition of ideology: "Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself" (45).

Armageddon and we battle for the Lord!." Yet this apocalyptic pronouncement, like the others that regularly punctuate the execution, is more reassuring than fear-inducing: "And with a grand wave of his red-white-and-blue plug hat, he brings on a Texas high-school marching band, batons flying, legs kicking, drums rolling, plumes fluttering, to play 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' The people bellow forth, drunk enough now to try the high notes, rapturous tears springing to their eyes, their hearts beating faster" (456). The public electrocution of the Rosenbergs begins with a lengthy and spectacular reenactment of the nation's preordained history. While the electric bulletin on the Times Tower reads "In thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight!" (416), Uncle Sam "unveils the stone tablets of the Constitution, said to be the same ones that George Washington brought down off Bunkum Hill," and he is followed by a Disneyesque parade of past presidents accompanied by "iconic figures from the epochs they represent" ("Pilgrims, Pirates, Planters and Pioneers . . . Gangbusters, Quarterbacks, Songwriters, Private Eyes, Self-Made Men"), all "miming the high drama of building a nation and taking over the world" (423-24). This is a pageant of the victor's history whose narrative logic indicates that the execution of the Rosenbergs, the end of the spectacle's story, functions metonymically as the eradication of the ideological enemy, the triumphal end of history.

But the triumphalism of this master narrative of history is deflated by Coover when, for example, children brought to witness the display of national might quickly lose interest: "fascinated by the first two jolts, they are now bored by the third; they squirm in their seats

as Julius's body whips and snaps in its bonds, covering up their ears against the crackling whine, asking 'What's history?' and complaining that they want to go home or go see Mickey Mouse or use the toilet" (510). What is history? The narrative momentum generated in over five hundred pages detailing, almost hour by hour, the three-day countdown to the Rosenbergs' execution is dispelled in an anti-apocalyptic denouement; national redemption through apocalyptic violence does not occur when, after Julius is executed, Ethel is electrocuted and, as if perversely refusing to die, she is then viciously re-electrocuted.[41] The final sentence of The Public Burning's last chapter, "Freedom's Holy Light: The Burning of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg," both echoes with grim irony the chapter's title and is left incomplete: "Her body, sizzling and popping like firecrackers, lights up with the force of the current, casting a flickering radiance on all those around her, and so she burns--and burns--and burns--as though held aloft by her own incandescent will and haloed about by all the gleaming great of the nation--" (517). Refusing the closure mandated by the dominant ideology, Coover suggests that the Rosenbergs remain unquiet ghosts haunting the national narrative

---

[41] The parodic foreshadowing of the House of Wax episode, in which a movie-goer who has forgotten to remove his 3-D glasses wanders through the subway and Times Square believing he is a witness to, and cause of, a final nuclear holocaust, also serves to dissipate the force of the apocalyptic end. He assumes that his guilty thoughts (Coover's poke at McCarthyite scrutiny of "tendencies") constitute "A crime worse than murder!"--just as the Rosenbergs are held to be guilty of a crime worse than murder. Like them, "I've altered the course of history!" (287). Yet the chapter ends on a deflationary note as the man passes out: "a curious episode on the way to Armageddon, nothing more" (288). For a discussion of this episode's function as a preliminary to the execution, see Louis Gallo, "Nixon and the 'House of Wax': An Emblematic Episode in Coover's The Public Burning," Critique 23 (Spring 1982): 43-51.

of triumphal history. The story of their trial, appeals, and execution continues as a repressed historical trauma that resists "containment" by the master plot of national destiny.

Narrative Closure, Ideological Foreclosure, and the Frames of History

Narrative closure is provided in The Public Burning, but it is thematized as ideological foreclosure. Earlier I argued that Nixon's rape by Uncle Sam can be understood as a commentary on the increasingly violent efforts at the impossible goal of containment. As its status as the novel's epilogue suggests, moreover, the scene can be read further as a representation of the ideological resolution of contradiction: the dogmatic finality of the "last word." Like a reader of conventional novels or fairy tales, Coover's Nixon has always desired the happy ending and that wish is given parodic fulfillment by the reworking in the epilogue, titled "Beauty and the Beast," of the traditional comedic ending in which the opposing elements embodied by hero and heroine are accommodated, and sometimes even magically overcome, in the ritual of marriage. As a neutralization of differences, however, Nixon's penetration by Uncle Sam repeats the process of ideological interpellation. He is directly hailed, in the language of patriotic duty and divine election, by the finger-pointing Uncle Sam of recruitment posters: "I want YOU! . . . you been ee-LECK-ted!" (530). For the last time Nixon wonders about the nature of the desire for the happy ending, suspecting that that desire

is already manipulated, but he responds in the Cold War metaphor of containment: "Maybe the worst thing that can happen to you in this world is to get what you think you want. And how did we know what we wanted? It was a scary question and I let it leak away, unanswered." Letting all questions about why we want what we want, and who says what we want and why, simply "leak" away in a rapturous identification with the state's embodiment, Nixon becomes the ideal subject and, so goes the logic of The Public Burning, the ideal future president-custodian of the nation's destiny. Nixon's identification with the dominant ideology is complete when he regards Uncle Sam as "the most beautiful thing in all the world": "I love you, Uncle Sam!" (534).

Nixon's final musings are typical of how nearly all thoughts, ideas, and statements in The Public Burning are presented as ideological constructions. The novel's strong suspicion of rhetoric and narrative convention suggests a desire for a discursive space free of ideology and the plots and counterplots it promotes. In the strategic scene in which Coover's Nixon confronts the Phantom in a Washington taxi, the only instance in the The Public Burning where the Phantom is not merely a threatening bogey conjured by Uncle Sam but appears physically substantial, the personification of the Soviet menace suddenly drops his hostile manner and addresses Nixon as one regular guy to another:

> "Look," he said, his voice mellowing, losing its hard twang, "can't we get past all these worn-out rituals, these stupid fuckin' reflexes?" It wouldn't do any good to grab him, I knew. The ungraspable Phantom. He was made of

> nothing solid, your hand would just slip right through, probably turn leprous forever. "They got nothin' to do with life, you know that, life's always new and changing, so why fuck it up with all this shit about scapegoats, sacrifices, initiations, saturnalias--?" (273)

This non-dialogue registers the Phantom's sincerity, his genuine desire to foreswear the distorting constraints of ideology, by contrasting his unmotivated offer to Nixon's inability to comprehend the "real" that is momentarily unmasked, unmediated before him. With this crucial yet missed opportunity--whose unprecedented, uncontaminated nature is marked by its narrative spontaneity in a text dominated by overdetermined codes--Coover seems to privilege a reality that remains undistorted by the necessarily narrative structure of national myth. Thus it is understandable that many have read the novel with reference to mythic ritual, seeing in Coover's presentation of the Rosenberg case anthropological truisms about an essential human nature.[42] But, as Paul Maltby observes, interpreting the public burning as a

---

[42] Like John Ramage, Louis Gallo, Tom LeClair, and (to some extent) Richard Walsh, Kathryn Hume approaches Coover's fiction from the perspective of myth and anthropology ("Robert Coover's Fictions: The Naked and the Mythic," Novel 12 [Winter 1979]: 127-48). See also Lois Gordon's study, Robert Coover: The Universal Fictionmaking Process (Carbondale and Evansville: Southern Illinois UP, 1983), whose focus on "the human need for structure and order" leads to the conclusion that The Public Burning actually "transcends a particular historical focus" (7, 52). This is not to dismiss the value of these myth-centered and anthropological readings (the thoroughness and range of Hume's is exemplary, making it particularly influential). Instead, it is to voice a frustration that their focus on an anthropological need for structure and order concludes with an emphasis on a primal human nature that does not then extend to a discussion of how, historically, that need has been co-opted to serve the powerful "ends" of a national narrative of historical necessity. My point

reenactment of an ancient communal rite or the outcome of a mythic struggle between archetypes tends to overlook a political reading of The Public Burning (97-98). The resolution of contradiction is what ideology, like ritual, aims to do, not Coover's novel. I want to suggest that, in distinct contrast to the interpellating rape scene that concludes the novel, the strategic confrontation between Nixon and the Phantom-cabbie marks a utopian moment in the text: it gestures toward the desired but impossible position of blissful clarity promised after the end of history and after the end of ideology.

The Public Burning, however, finally refuses the consolation of a position that is beyond or outside ideology. Instead, it urges the reader to recognize her participation in the narrative of history. Much of Coover's fiction emphasizes the role of writer and reader in the fabrication of a coherent social reality, however fantastic. Tom LeClair argues that something similar occurs in The Public Burning when Coover intends the reader to understand her involvement in the construction of the master narrative of "America" just as the audience of a public performance, the structural model of The Public Burning, partakes in the construction

---

is that the emphasis on myth and ritual tends to dehistoricize the Rosenberg story in particular and the Cold War in general. Thus, in Gallo's discussion, for example, historical agency is denied, and the threat posed by the development of the atom and hydrogen bombs in no way alters the mythic pattern: "Nothing ever changes; ritual repeats itself; the executioner burns his victim. Even the advent of the Bomb does not signify a change in underlying pattern, for the executioner merely broadens his scope by taking on all mankind as his victims" (47). Because the ritual is the focus, and neither its circumstances nor participants (nor victims), the Rosenbergs are, in a sense, again eradicated. Furthermore, the emphasis on archetypes, mythic struggles, and ritual victimization tends to minimize or even excuse, in a shoulder-shrugging way, the illegalities and abuse of power that surrounded the Rosenberg case.

of a consensual reality (Art of Excess 112). This is not mere metafictional play, however. Richard Walsh maintains that the narrative inscription of the historical subject is double-edged when The Public Burning's excess violates the novel's own conventions: "the inexorable march of the narrative exceeds the limits prescribed by convention, so that to read it at all is to be, and to experience being, coerced into transgression" (339). The result is a carnivalesque laughter generated by a satire from within the frame of apocalyptic history (345).[43] This is not to deny the tragedy of the Rosenbergs' story; rather, it is to suggest that Coover's presentation of their sentence deflates the foregone conclusions of tragic apocalypse, thereby offering their story as a tragedy occuring within the open horizon of the comic frame of history. That comic frame emphasizes human agency in the making of history and proposes, in Coover's terms, a socially responsible view of individual action: "I tend to think of tragedy as a kind of adolescent reponse to the universe," he once remarked in an interview; "the higher truth is a comic response" (Hertzel 28). What sets in motion the sequence of events presented in The Public Burning is not the inevitability of the end as conceived in the tragic frame, but human venality and stupidity.

The narratives promoted by any dominant ideology, Coover's fiction insists, are unavoidable. But that does not mean they are inescapable. Coover told another interviewer that he believes the fiction-maker's social function is to provide "better fictions with which we

---

[43] Jackson Cope provides a thorough application of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about the carnivalesque and dialogic nature of the novel to The Public Burning (59-113).

can re-form our notions of things" (Gado 149-50). The reader of The Public Burning is thus invited and soon obligated to acknowledge her role in the production of a better history. By presenting the unconscionable end of the Rosenbergs' lives as the result of political intolerance, human cupidity, and moral insensibility, Coover's novel refuses to let Julius and Ethel Rosenberg be forgotten in the strategic amnesia that underwrites the triumphalist narrative of apocalyptic destiny, thereby rejecting the closure of sequence that works to confirm the dominant ideology's mastery of the end. Revealing how within the discontinuities of interpellation there resides the possibility of other narratives and other historical ends, The Public Burning offers an ethical challenge to work for the utopian moment briefly glimpsed in the text, no matter its impossibility. That utopian goal may be an impossible end, but it is one worth striving for, the novel suggests, even in spite of the risks of co-option.

Chapter Four:

Cultural Paranoia, Conspiracy Plots, and Apocalyptic Disclosure: William Burroughs's Cities of the Red Night and Thomas Pynchon's Vineland

Both William Burroughs's Cities of the Red Night and Thomas Pynchon's Vineland examine the paranoid suspicion of conspiracy as another way of approaching the end. Conspiracy-thinking is a variant of apocalyptic logic: both share a teleological understanding of history and regard the end (of history, of history's narrative) as the privileged point of final meaning. Offering a narrative of hitherto unseen "ends," conspiracy theory relentlessly works toward the revelation of origins, the "hidden hand" that secretly motivates history's plot; its narratives seek a final revelation of the truth (the literal meaning of "apocalypse") in the conflation of disclosure with closure. Yet conspiracy-thinking invariably fails to arrive at a stable form of narrative closure that would reveal a determinate source. It is a potentially endless interpretive practice that, seeking closure in disclosure, generates a narrative that defies a conclusive resolution, thereby suggesting the endlessness of the end.[1]

---

[1] Mark Fenster, whose Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture is the most thorough and even-handed discussion of the subject that I know of, writes that in

In the novels of Burroughs and Pynchon, paranoia and the conspiracy theories it fosters are presented as a possible method of resistance to the dominant ideology. That paranoia, moreover, often gestures toward a once present but now lost possibility of a transparent practical politics. In the context of a televisual culture whose innumerable networks of power and information are increasingly interconnected, conspiracy theory suggests an oppositional practice that aims at recovering individual agency. The political scientist Jodi Dean argues that "democratic politics in an age of virtuality will need to turn to conspiracy theory as a way of making links, rather than simply accepting those linkages and explanations given by corporate and governmental power" (23).[2] Conspiracy-

---

conspiracy theory interpretation "is not merely active, it is endlessly active in finding and linking details to the larger conspiracy. Unfortunately, if the chain is endless, so the layers of deception are infinite, and if the connections are never completed, then the base truth remains out of reach" (89). "Closure always comes," he later adds, "but resolution rarely arrives" (131).

For a suggestive discussion of the ways in which apocalyptic models of history can promote conspiracy theories, see the first chapter of Stephen O'Leary's Arguing the Apocalypse (3-19). Although O'Leary does not then continue to elaborate in detail, it is apparent from his discussion of apocalyptic logic in the political and social culture of American power that the closed frame of apocalyptic history in the tragic mode encourages conspiracy-thinking.

[2] Documenting how American citizens are increasingly suspicious of experts, authorities, and technology, and that many people find it likely that science and technology are used to deceive and manipulate rather than benefit and protect them, Dean urges that conspiracy theory be considered culturally legitimate: "Insofar as its practitioners can link together varieties of disparate phenomena to find patterns of denial, occlusion, and manipulation, conspiracy theory, far from a label dismissively attached to the lunatic fringe, may well be an appropriate vehicle for political contestation" (8). Fenster also argues that conspiracy theory is not simply or merely the product of victims of pathology and political demogogy; he regards it as "a

thinking's attempts to reassert historical agency by making these links between the individual or local group and the totality of economic and political relations within national and transnational structures of power suggest its utopian impulse. Fredric Jameson regards the emergence of conspiracy theory in popular culture over the last decades as both a response to a now global network of corporate power and an expression of a utopian desire to conceptualize a total model, a "cognitive map," that provides the impossible "view from above" of a system of power so invisibly vast and complexly interconnected that it resists representation. In providing other, once concealed histories, conspiracy theory strains toward an alternative omniscience, an "inverted providentiality" that resists the narrative destiny of the dominant ideology's plot (Geopolitical Aesthetic 1-3). Conspiracy theory, in other words, might provide a paradigm for representing the unrepresentable history of power.[3]

---

populist expression of a democratic culture" (xiii), and criticizes the social, political, and historical assumptions of Richard Hofstadter's influential The Paranoid Style in American Politics (New York: Knopf, 1966). Unlike Dean, however, he has reservations about the effectiveness of conspiracy-thinking as an oppositional strategy, analyzing it not as a production on the outside of social and political practice but one that is both promoted and easily co-opted in a culture of cynicism.

[3] Mark Kingwell analyzes the proliferation of conspiracy theories in the late twentieth century as symptomatic of a vaguely defined fin-de-millennium anxiety that hearkens back to nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle malaise (Dreams of Millennium [Toronto: Viking, 1996], 262-68). Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein, on the other hand, provide a more focused argument when they maintain that the emergence of conspiracy theories in the past few decades is one result of the postmodern incredulity toward metanarrative. Conspiracy theory, they suggest, is beginning to replace the master narrative of apocalyptic history, albeit in debased form (Data Trash: The Theory of the Virtual Class [New York: St. Martin's, 1994], 58).

But, as Cities of the Red Night and Vineland make clear, this alternative view from above is greatly problematic. Conspiracy theory is often vulnerable to, and might even be be a form of, co-option. The endlessness of the end can be a dead end.[4] Burroughs and Pynchon are aware not only of their novels' own entanglement in the cultural narratives they seek to undermine, but also of the possibility that the paranoia of their texts might well serve as a means of cultural reinscription. "To speak is to lie--To live is to collaborate," reads Burroughs's Nova Express (15); and Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, perhaps the canonical text of postmodern paranoia, presents a Counterforce whose struggle against the totalizing System is tolerated by, and indeed part of, the hegemony of that system. Thinking of the Counterforce as "doomed pet freaks . . . living on as Their pet," Roger Mexico muses: "They will use us. We will help legitimize Them, though They don't need it really, it's another

---

[4] Fenster's analysis of the limitations of conspiracy theory as a viable practice of social and political opposition suggests that the counterhistories it claims to uncover are sometimes forms of the narrative fetishization discussed by Eric Santner. In this case conspiracy theory offers a narrative agency that operates as a replacement for the conspiracy theorist's real or perceived loss of historical agency. "Conspiracy theory," Fenster writes, "displaces the citizen's desire for political significance onto a signifying regime in which interpretation and a narrative of conspiracy replace meaningful political engagement" (80). I think that both Burroughs and Pynchon, in their energetic generation of paranoid plots that cross, crisscross, and sometimes confound each other, at moments confront this possibility that historical agency might, in conspiracy-thinking, reside only in its narrative strategies of perpetual linkage. Pynchon thematizes this as Herbert Stencil's problem in V., Oedipa Maas's double bind in The Crying of Lot 49, and a good deal of Tyrone Slothrop's dilemma in Gravity's Rainbow. While Pynchon generally presents the question of paranoid agency with irony, for Burroughs it is the source of some anguish in The Place of Dead Roads and especially The Western Lands, the novels that complete the trilogy Cities of the Red Night begins.

dividend for Them, nice but not critical" (713). Paranoia, moreover, is present in Cities of the Red Night not merely at the level of content but also in the interpretive strategies it elicits and then confutes. That is, it compels the reader to consider how conventional practices of interpretation are also paranoid, producing not radical readings but normalized ones. Indicating the limits of the logic of conspiracy-thinking and its subversive potential, Burroughs's novel, like Pynchon's, is "political" not just in the way disruptive textual strategies are conventionally understood, but in its exposure of the interpellative processes at work in what Patrick O'Donnell describes as the "double bind" of "cultural paranoia" and the conspiratorial plots and counterplots it generates.

Conspiracy-thinking in Cities of the Red Night and Vineland reveals a political double bind that is a complicated form of cultural paranoia's "cooperative resistance," in O'Donnell's words (183). It is one, possibly extreme, expression of what Peter Sloterdijk terms an "enlightened false consciousness" that, well taught by history that what is "true" or "good" or even "real" is generally an ideological construction promoted by the interests of power, would like to assume it is beyond the manipulative appeal of any truth-claim.[5] The result of this

---

[5] Dis-illusioned by history, enlightened false consciousness is disillusioned with enlightenment itself. Sloterdijk defines it as "that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered" (Critique of Cynical Reason, trans. Michael Eldred [Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1987], 5).

valorized "realism," however, is an "integrated cynicism," in Sloterdijk's words, that results in political paralysis (5, emphasis added). The cynical refusal to invest in anything often amounts to a reinvestment in the system. Rather than avoiding being duped by power, cynicism actually accommodates power by disempowering itself. Slavoj Žižek insists that our contemporary disinvestment in ideological truths--the position of post-ideology--does not mean the "end of ideology." As he suggests, the ready suspicion of ideology's hidden operations might be a suspicion that is more accommodating of a dominant ideology than oppositional to it; indeed, it might be a disbelief in ideology encouraged by ideology itself: "Cynical distance is just one way--one of many ways--to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them" (33). This paralyzed situation is of a powerlessness cognizant of its lack of power, for cynicism is usually self-conscious; it is, moreover, a paralysis without hope of an end. Unable to think of a future "otherwise," integrated cynicism gazes at an infinite present of dead-ended paralysis.[6]

---

[6] The "essential point in modern cynicism," Sloterdijk observes, is "the ability of its bearers to work--in spite of anything that might happen, and especially, after anything that might happen" (5). In this view, wars happen, poverty happens, injustice happens: such things always were and always will be. Having given up the possibility of historical choice, cynical reason gives up the possibility of historical alternatives. All that is left is the "virtue" of the continuity of self-preservation--but a self-preservation always threatened by the intimidating presence on its narrow historical horizon of a potential catastrophe that generally ensures cynical reason's participation in the continuation of the present status quo.

This integrated cynicism, as well as the paralysis it fosters, is avoided in Cities of the Red Night and Vineland. Both novels mark the crucial rejection by their authors of a previous investment in the apocalyptic structure of conspiracy theory as a means of conceiving a coherent narrative of history that would unravel the riddle of power and explain the continued presence of social injustice and political inequity. Also crucial, however, is the attempt of both novels to retain the utopian elements of conspiracy-thinking. Refusing the foreclosure of the dominant ideology's narrative of the end, both insist on the unfinished business of history by offering glimpses of a past utopian moment that, it is hoped, can be recovered. Utopia is customarily considered a future goal that resides at the endpoint of history; inhabiting both Cities of the Red Night and Vineland, however, is the appealing notion that utopia exists within history, and not outside or beyond it. Maintaining that utopian goals are the result of human action in historical time rather than the outcome of an apocalyptic end-time, both novels maintain a "minimalism of hope" that can exist despite the intimidation of imminent catastrophe--a threat always present in Cities of the Red Night and Vineland--and the pull of the cynicism of an enlightened false consciousness.[7]

---

[7] In the conclusion to his Critique of Cynical Reason, Sloterdijk suggests that cynical reason's retreat from ethical action and ideals amounts to an accommodation of the terror tactics available to apocalyptic thinking: "Hey, we're alive; hey we're selling ourselves; hey, we're arming; those who die young save social security contributions. In this way cynicism guarantees the expanded reproduction of the past on the newest level of what is currently the worst. It is for this reason that prophecies of an imminent and manmade end of the world are so much in vogue" (546).

The phrase "minimalism of hope" is from Andreas Huyssen's foreword to Critique of

Neither novel fully resolves the tension between utopian longing and the seduction of apocalyptic closure, each concluding with an ending diffused with a nostalgia for what might have been and the hope that it may yet still be. The nostalgia of each novel's ending, however, does not indicate a weakness in historical thinking. Rather, it is offered as a willingness to pursue historical possibility in spite of the paralysis of cynical reason. Maybe, both novels suggest, thinking about the future by way of recovering the past provides a means of approaching a utopian end of history.

Conspiracy and the Endlessness of the End: Cities of the Red Night

William Burroughs often used the term "abstract mapping" to describe his textual explorations of the discursive structuring of reality (Punday 38); and he also characterized himself as a "map maker, an explorer of psychic areas . . . a cosmonaut of inner space," who sees "no point in exploring areas that have already been thoroughly surveyed" (qtd. in Mottram 13).[8] In the first prefatory pages of Cities of the Red Night he offers an attempt at

---

Cynical Reason (xxiv).

[8] Eric Mottram's study brings together difficult to find interviews with Burroughs as well as those texts by Burroughs either privately printed or published in now defunct little magazines and underground journals (William Burroughs: The Algebra of Need [London: Boyars, 1977]).

cognitive mapping, at the view from above, when the text locates the problems of the late twentieth century in a missed historical opportunity at a "retroactive Utopia" (11). Burroughs recounts how, decades before the American and French revolutions, the pirate Captain Mission founded in Central America the settlement of Libertatia under the following Articles: "all decisions with regard to the colony to be submitted to vote by the colonists; the abolition of slavery for any reason including debt; the abolition of the death penalty; and freedom to follow any religious beliefs or practices without sanction or molestation" (10). Burroughs's use of the word "retroactive" to describe the utopia of Mission's egalitarian settlement is worth consideration; it suggests both an endpoint in history that retroactively redeems the past, as well as the beginning of a new history that inaugurates an alternative future. It suggests a moment, however "realistically" impossible, of a potential utopia already present in history rather than one outside history that is achievable only in an apocalyptic rupture.

Burroughs's choice of the adjective "retroactive," moreover, is not haphazard. It appears elsewhere on the same page in his description of the historical possibilities latent in Libertatia's Articles: "There is no stopping the Articulated. The white man is retroactively relieved of his burden. Whites will be welcomed as workers, settlers, teachers, and technicians, but not as colonists or masters. No man may violate the Articles" (11, emphasis added). The Articulated remembered here suggest another history narrated by the inarticulate--those silenced in history and by History--and written in another, yet heretofore unarticulated, historical language or symbolic structure, whose potential historical

retroactivity is present in the retrospective and prospective possibilities of Burroughs's narrative. This idea of retroactivity will be again foregrounded in the final pages of Cities of the Red Night in their tone of retrospective nostalgia. What I want to emphasize here, however, is that Burroughs's prefatory presentation of a retroactive utopia is not so much a fantasy of fulfillment as a form of compensation for a lack of historical agency--a criticism often levelled at conspiracy narratives--as it is an indication of a narrative project to keep historically present a past utopian moment that, it is hoped, can be retrospectively recovered.

Yet this retroactivity, while suggesting utopian desire, also signifies the totalizing narrative logic of conspiracy theory that, resisting the foreclosure of the dominant ideology's narrative of history, works toward another definitive closure. If Libertatia and similar pirate communes in the West Indies and Central and South America had survived, Burroughs writes, "the history of the world could have been altered" (10). "Imagine such a movement on a world-wide scale," he adds. "Faced by the actual practice of freedom, the French and American revolutions would be forced to stand by their words" (11). By its third page Cities of the Red Night already installs both the utopian longing and the suspicion of a hidden malign power characteristic of conspiracy-thinking when it summarizes the last three centuries of European colonialism as an omnivorous process that consumes the land, its peoples, and their minds:

> The chance was there. The chance was missed. The principles of the French and American revolutions became windy lies in the mouths of politicians. The

> liberal revolutions of 1848 created the so-called republics of Central and South America, with a dreary history of dictatorship, oppression, graft, and bureaucracy, thus closing this vast, underpopulated continent to any possibility of communes along the lines set forth by Captain Mission. In any case South America will soon be crisscrossed by highways and motels. In England, Western Europe, and America, the over-population made possible by the Industrial Revolution leaves scant room for communes, which are commonly subject to state and federal law and frequently harassed by the local inhabitants. There is simply no room left for "freedom from the tyranny of government" since city dwellers depend on it for food, power, water, transportation, protection, and welfare. Your right to live where you want, with companions of your choosing, under laws to which you agree, died in the eighteenth century with Captain Mission. Only a miracle or a disaster could restore it. (11-12)

This paragraph concludes the first prefatory chapter and it is worth quoting in full to indicate the movement of Cities of the Red Night's conspiracy-thinking. It begins with an apocalyptic understanding of a master plot of history--"the chance was there, the chance was missed"--and ends with a nightmare vision of a monolithic closure in which the bureaucratized state, as well as big business, colonizes everything so that there is no space left uncontaminated.

As if to blast away this monolithic presence Burroughs concludes his first prefatory chapter with the apocalyptic hope and warning that "only a miracle or a disaster could restore" the lost historical moment represented by Captain Mission's destroyed settlement and then provides in the next and final chapter of his prefatory apparatus an "invocation," as the chapter is titled, to "the Ancient Ones":

> to the Lord of Abominations, Humwawa, whose face is a mass of entrails, whose breath is the stench of dung and the perfume of death, Dark Angel of all that is excreted and sours, Lord of Decay, Lord of the Future, who rides on a whispering south wind, to Pazuzu, Lord of Fevers and Plagues, Dark Angel of the Four Winds with rotting genitals from which he howls through sharpened teeth over stricken cities, to Kutulu . . . (13)

The final words, printed in upper case, are the reputed maxim of Hassan i Sabbah, the Old Man of the Mountain and Master of Assassins, and much quoted in Burroughs's writings, both public and private: "NOTHING IS TRUE. EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED" (13). With this emphatic warning to view everything as the production of power, what these opening pages seem to promise is that Cities of the Red Night will provide an apocalyptic disclosure, a revelatory rupture into an ideology-free zone above or beyond the mundane power struggles of history.

Cities of the Red Night, however, is aware of its entanglement in that which it attacks. Offering a new geopolitical aesthetic in Naked Lunch (1959) as Mary McCarthy suggested in an early defence of that novel, Burroughs confronts its geopolitical dilemma in Cities of the Red Night.[9] That is, if the foremost disturbing feature of the rampant process of commodification is its ubiquity, both external and internal, making it seemingly impossible to imagine ways of resisting or changing it, then it presents an expanding totalization of culture in which the corollary of global penetration is individual colonization.[10] This presents a predicament for Burroughs, a "literary outlaw" as one of his biographers, Ted Morgan, styles him, and a problem that Cities of the Red Night attempts to work through. Indeed, the novel represents a shift from an earlier notion of ideology as a means of a politically interested system of repression and exploitation on the one hand and a process of illusion and misrecognition on the other. Following from the important insights of the earlier texts that

---

[9] In an essay first published in 1963, McCarthy wrote: "I thought the national novel, like the nation-state, was dying and that a new kind of novel, based on statelessness, was beginning to be written." Naked Lunch, like Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire and Lolita and Günter Grass's The Tin Drum, is typical of this new novel, she argued, making most other recent novels seem "almost regional" ("Burroughs' Naked Lunch," in William S. Burroughs at the Front, ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg [Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991], 33).

[10] Jameson describes this situation as the eclipse of critical distance when "the prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedean footholds for critical effectivity" (Postmodernism 49). See also David Harvey's definition of postmodernism as the compression of the conceptual categories of space and time under late capitalism (The Condition of Postmodernity [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989]).

ideology operates discursively, Cities of the Red Night recognizes its integral role in the construction of the paranoid subject. Burroughs's quarrel has always been with an absent or conspiratorially invisible system of power that disables dissent and yet, as his career proves, perversely enables it; and in Cities of the Red Night he presents the discursive mechanisms of interpellation without, this time, pretending to be immune to their viral or parasitic operations.

The Virus of Subjectivity, Ideological Control, and Apocalyptic Rupture

Because Cities of the Red Night signals a change from Burroughs's prior valorization of conspiracy theory as a means of seeking a liberating rupture from the control of a totalizing discourse, it is necessary to make a detour here through his earlier works in order to grasp how Cities indicates a significant shift from their understanding of the workings of ideology and its interpellative functions.

In Junkie (1953) Burroughs portrayed a local New York underworld of drug addiction that he would later develop into a cosmology of manipulated desire, what he famously called "the Algebra of Need" in Naked Lunch (xxxix). He soon expanded the situation of the addict to that of the general human condition, placing everyone--or nearly everyone--in the same powerless position of desperately needing a potentially lethal fix. The world of Naked Lunch is divided into two groups of control-addicts: those who are addicted to controlling others,

and those who are addicted to being controlled. The junk is subjectivity administered by those in power, whose intoxicating dose of ideology that "hails" or "speaks to" each individual--and "only" or "especially" to him or her--manipulates subjectivity into subjection. Following the algebra of need, subjects require ever increasing doses of subjection in order for them to experience their subjectivity, what for Burroughs is little more than an addictive subjugation. In powerful allegories of the processes of hegemony in the Nova trilogy--The Soft Machine (1961), The Ticket that Exploded (1962), and Nova Express (1964)--Burroughs soon elaborated Naked Lunch's metaphors of the parasite and the virus as well as the metastatization process of cancer cells, imperceptible or invisible entities that surreptitiously colonize their host, making the alien a normalized member of the body, whether individual or group, and making its identification close to impossible, and also making its final cure or eradication impossible. When the parasite overtakes the host, just as the malignant cancer cells overtake the body that produces them, the boundary between healthy and sick becomes indistinguishable. The cure of the one can mean the death of the other.

Burroughs has always understood that ideology works discursively; and language for him is the ultimate virus, the ultimate parasite. The individual therefore becomes nothing more than a "soft machine" condemned to a "life sentence" of obediently receiving and just as passively reproducing a mere "flesh script" of an already written text that can only reiterate the "word lines" Burroughs spoke of in one of his many interviews: "I feel that the principal instrument of monopoly and control that prevents expansion of consciousness is the word

lines controlling thought feeling and apparent sensory impressions of the human host" (qtd. in Skau 402). The "Reality Studio" of the Nova trilogy, which manufactures images and narratives of happiness, satisfaction, and--crucially--freedom, is thus central in the cultural reproduction of fictive scripts and prerecorded programs in which the individual supposedly exercises an autonomous choice in the fashioning of his or her destiny. Agents of the "Nova Conspiracy," interstellar parasites who feed on the needs of earthlings for addictively reassuring sentiments about their exercise of inalienable rights, such as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, control their victims by means of ideological manipulation. Thus their hegemony can only be disrupted by exposing the cultural narcosis that veils the interested power needs behind its conventional plots and word lines. Burroughs's goal is to question the easy teleology behind those lines: "No more junk scripts, no more word scripts, no more flesh scripts" (Nova Express 154). The word institutes not just a plot, according to Burroughs, but a master plot. Yet, if language functions as a parasitic or viral medium of control, then language can also function as a weapon of resistance. In the paranoid worlds of his texts, one can either be manipulated by words or choose to manipulate them, what Geoff Ward describes as a textual practice of "fighting paranoia with paranoia" (349).[11]

---

[11] There are a number of discussions of how Burroughs's texts thematize linguistic control and aim to resist it through textual method. The most pertinent are Michael Skau, "The Central Verbal System: The Prose of William Burroughs," Style 15 (Fall 1981): 401-14; Cary Nelson, "The End of the Body: Radical Space in Burroughs," in William S. Burroughs at the Front, ed. Skerl and Lydenberg, 119-32; and Tony Tanner's chapter on Burroughs in City of Words (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), 109-40; as well as the most thorough, Robin Lydenberg,

Burroughs's experiments with the cut-up and fold-in, in which disparate texts are randomly combined or transposed, espouse what Frederick Dolan describes as a "Beat metaphysics" when they attempt to embody an unmediated experience through either a transparent language or an eventual abandonment of language altogether (536-37). In an important early essay Ihab Hassan termed these experiments "the literature of silence," a radical literature that discredits language in its efforts to demystify it. The cut-ups reveal the arbitrary nature of language and possibly even the reality it claims to represent, offering like the "naked lunch" the revelation of "what is on the end of every fork" (Naked Lunch xxxvii). If, as Burroughs put it, "my words are prerecorded for me as yours are prerecorded for you" (qtd. in Skau 409), then his strategy is to confound the social control he regards as inherent in the continuity of the linear sentence and the structure of conventional narrative. (In another interview, Burroughs was even deeply suspicious of the motives behind the push for universal literacy [Mottram 147].) "Rub out the word" and "storm the reality studio" become slogans in the campaign against the controlling Word: "Towers, open fire--Explode word lines of the earth--Combat troops show board books and dictate out symbol language of virus enemy--Fight, controlled body prisoners--Cut all tape" (Ticket 104).

Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction (Urbana and Chicago: U Illinois P, 1987).

Burroughs's negative method, which seeks to strip language of its manipulative control as it strains in each of the texts toward an apocalyptic rupture, suggests that the early texts regard language as a discursive veil that conceals a pure space free of ideological contamination. The viral word, according to The Ticket that Exploded, creates "a grey veil between you and what you saw or more often did not see" (209). Moreover, there is always the sense that language as a totalizing system is itself a conspiracy. Like a virus, like a parasite, like cancer cells, words maintain their control only when their power remains undetected. Because reality is a veil of signs, these signs must have some conspiratorial source that manufactures and manipulates them. To rupture the sign-system is therefore to achieve a "radical space," in the words of Cary Nelson, where, after "the apocalyptic death of speech," the "primal word is reborn" (127; see also Ayers 227). But this belief is examined, arguably for the first time, in the second trilogy that begins with Cities of the Red Night, whose ambiguous ending calls into question Burroughs's earlier program of apocalyptic rupture.

Teleological Plots, Paranoid Interpretation, and Reading for the End

Beginning with The Wild Boys (1971) and culminating in the trilogy of Cities of the Red Night, The Place of Dead Roads (1984), and The Western Lands (1987), Burroughs

moved toward more conventional forms of narrative--a move that was greeted with a general sigh of relief among his reviewers.[12] Certainly the introduction of easily recognizable narrative structure, although restrictive in some ways, offers clear limits to work against, something the amorphous shape of the earlier experiments could not provide. Burroughs's friend and secretary James Grauerholz, who helped edit Cities of the Red Night, emphasized this feature when he observed in an interview that "my greatest contribution was that . . . he should really make this book have boundaries. . . . [Cities] has boundaries, it has a beginning . . . what I mean is that there are outside limits" (Zurbrugg 26). In fact, the novel contains three interrelated plots, each adapted from the easily recognized plots of genre-fiction: adventure tales, science fiction, and the detective story. This affinity of Burroughs to the plot-driven texts of pulp fiction, which has always been something of an embarrassment to many of his explicators, leads Jennie Skerl to argue that Burroughs's reliance on such fiction is potentially subversive: "What all these popular forms have in common is a paranoid view of the world

---

[12] As Robin Lydenberg notes with some amusement, Cities of the Red Night retains Burroughs's earlier method of juxtaposition, montage, and cut-up. She wonders if the critical welcome of the return of the wayward experimentalist "back into the narrative fold" signals not so much a dramatic change in Burroughs's style as a development in what readers "will recognize and tolerate as successful narrative" (Word Cultures 177). Daniel Punday sees Burroughs's shift toward more conventional forms of narrative as part of a general trend among writers such as Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, and Kathy Acker to reintroduce narrative structure without, at the same time, rejecting the insights offered by earlier textual investigations into narrativity and the cultural assumptions embodied by narrative forms ("Narrative after Deconstruction: Structure and the Negative Poetics of William Burroughs' Cities of the Red Night," Style 29 [Spring 1995]: 36).

that Burroughs accepts as valid. Popular art, like pseudoscience, reveals what society would like to repress" (Burroughs 42).[13] But one could argue that popular fiction, like the paranoid suspicions it sometimes expresses, performs a conservative function because it is vacuous diversion or even the propagator of prepackaged truths. The point here, however, is not the social value or literary merit of the genre-fiction Burroughs has chosen, but the plots that fiction generally installs. That is, the conventional trajectories of boys' adventure stories, pulp science fiction, and especially the detective story are teleological. Page-turners that are "consumed," this fiction is read for the ending, with the dilatory area of the narrative operating as a pleasurable series of deferrals of the hero's inevitable victory, conquest, or solution to the crime. These are the boundaries Burroughs works against when the three plots of Cities of the Red Night set in motion a powerful triple narrative telos and yet resist its conventional closure.[14]

Although Cities of the Red Night installs the plots of popular fiction, it is hardly conventional. The text's structure of short, discontinuous chapters confronts the reader with a disorienting space of heterogeneous places and times. It offers the impossible space of

---

[13] Wayne Pounds provides a Bakhtinian analysis of Cities of the Red Night, arguing that its carnivalesque elements reveal a utopian impulse ("The Postmodern Anus: Parody and Utopia in Two Recent Novels by William Burroughs," in William S. Burroughs at the Front, ed. Skerl and Lydenberg, 217-32).

[14] In fact, as Skerl reports, some of the novel's reviewers, such as Anthony Burgess, were disappointed that each of the three plots are left unconcluded (Burroughs 93).

heterotopia when, like the cut-ups, fragments of various and competing discursive orders are juxtaposed but are not resolved by the univocal order of a master plot, conspiratorial or otherwise.[15] Each plot begins with a distinct time and place: Noah Blake's pirate adventures along the Atlantic coast and in Latin America take place in the eighteenth century; the Cities of the Red Night are set in the distant past of the Gobi Desert; and Clem Snide's detective story begins in contemporary New York. Burroughs soon collapses the usual space-time boundaries, however, not only when characters from one plot enter into another (Jerry, the present-day missing person, appears as a deck hand on The Great White, as does Jim Brady, Clem Snide's assistant), but also when one character from one plot merges identity with another character from another plot (Noah becomes Clem becomes Audrey in the Cities of the Red Night). For example, in "Cheers here are the nondead," ostensibly a chapter in the Cities plot, the ambiguously identified first-person narrator (is he Noah? Clem? Jerry?) wakes up to an "officer [who] looked down at me from some stinker of a battleship film" (184). After asking his whereabouts, he is told "we're on Krup's spaceship or so he claims" (186). Krup is "a heavy metal junk runner, known as Opium Jones in the trade" (186), and "a Nazi war criminal" (188). But Opium Jones is a character from Noah Blake's story, a figure from the eighteenth century who has entered the very futuristic ancient history of the Cities of the

---

[15] Brian McHale applies Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia to the multiple-world spaces he regards as typical of postmodern fiction and offers the "Interzone" of Burroughs's Naked Lunch, with the "Zone" of Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, as a paradigm to that fiction's world-view (Constructing Postmodernism [London and New York: Routledge, 1992], 250).

Red Night story to become an ex-Nazi (and his ship, the Melvillesque Great White becomes Krup's spaceship, the all-male The Billy Celeste, formerly The Enterprise [190]--is he "really" Captain Kirk?). And finally, a more fundamental ontological boundary is crossed when the first-person narrator learns that "All the boys from your scripts" are also on board (186, emphasis added):

> Audrey, Jerry, all the Jims and Johns and Alis and Kikis and Strobe, Kelley, and Dahlfar. One foot in a navy mess and the other on some kooky spaceship. You see, there is a pretense this is just a naval station and you never know which is the pretense: spaceship or navy. One minute you are getting popped in Tamaghis, the next you're on KP or swabbing the deck. . . . You set out for the Big Dipper and wind up stranded in Vladivostok. (186)

Cities of the Red Night offers a paranoid universe of indeterminate identity in which characters do not merely cross over into other fictional territories but slip into and out of the supposedly discrete identities of other characters, and even of their author, while the time and place of disparate settings, basic categories of comprehension, also overlap with one another. Thus it is too simplistic to characterize Burroughs's method, as Brian McHale does, as that of "Chinese boxes," in which one narrative level is embedded in another, for that assumes a master plot or master narrative (Constructing Postmodernism 158).

To describe the fictional universe of Cities of the Red Night as heterotopia is, perhaps, imprecise. For the novel fosters a paranoid reading practice that soon turns the discontinuity of its heterogeneous plots into one master plot of continuity. Slippage is everywhere when paranoia is present not merely at the level of content but also that of method: in an identityless fictional universe everything bleeds into everything else. Even the sharp-edged contours of juxtaposition, the crucial element of Burroughs's literary technique, become increasingly obscure in the last quarter of Cities of the Red Night when the seepage among the three interrelated plots creates continuity rather than discontinuity. Confronted with a fictional world in which everything is increasingly contiguous, the reader is encouraged to read paranoiacally, making more and more connections, and thus reducing the three plots into one. McHale has shown in his analyses of Pynchon's and Umberto Eco's novels how they at once elicit but confute "proper" or "real" paranoid interpretations, offering a powerful critique of the institutionalization of paranoia and its consequent recuperation and neutralization in one traditional center of cultural critique--the university--where students are still trained to "only connect" when they undertake close readings of the text (Constructing Postmodernism 87-114, 165-187). Something similar occurs with the reading practices Cities of the Red Night both invites and refuses.

Jennie Skerl's important discussions of Cities of the Red Night illustrate how it elicits paranoid strategies of interpretation. The first American academic to publish a book-length study of Burroughs that includes Cities of the Red Night, she argues what is likely to become

a standard reading of Burroughs's novel when, as a well-trained reader, she too only connects. Emphasizing not just intelligibility but integration, Skerl reads all of Burroughs's texts as a quest, with Burroughs himself as the heroic autobiographical protagonist relentlessly seeking the truth behind the veil of language. Fair enough, given his early Beat milieu and his well-documented real-life searches for yage, a drug rumored to have revelatory powers. But this approach soon reduces Cities of the Red Night to the telos of the popular plots it so energetically confutes:

> Each story becomes reflexive as, in each case, a character within the story is revealed to be the writer of the story, and each writer merges with his own story in a circular pattern. The most important merger is that of the heroes of the three plots, each of whom is a quester for knowledge and a writer. Noah Blake of the retroactive utopia merges with Clem Snide of the detective story, who merges with Audrey--a wild boy in the cities story. In the final chapters, the entire novel is collapsed into the consciousness of the adolescent Audrey, who has either dreamed or written it all. (Burroughs 90)

Why the need to tidy up the paranoid sprawl of Cities of the Red Night into the banal retrospective conclusion that "it was all just a dream"? Throughout her book Skerl rightly emphasizes the utopian elements of Burroughs's texts and argues that in Cities of the Red Night "utopia is attained not by trying to imagine an ideal future but by rewriting history to produce a different present" (Burroughs 92). But her reading strategy of relentlessly

connecting the disconnected, an institutionalized version of cultural paranoia, searches for a cohesive and unifying plot in Cities's counter-histories that finally negates the novel's aim to think history "otherwise." Elsewhere, Skerl again makes orthodox textual connections when she valorizes the role of the detective Clem Snide, emphasizing his conventional function as another methodical interpreter of the discontinuous and readerly tidy-upper of the disconnected. She concludes that "Burroughs' dystopian Cities and utopian communes are placed in conflict in the present as metaphors for opposing forces in contemporary society, and the writer-detective must resolve the conflict" ("Freedom Through Fantasy" 129). Again: why the critical necessity to resolve the conflict which, this time, not only overlooks the fact that Clem Snide does not produce a resolution to the supposedly competing plots, let alone a solution to the conspiracy (instead, he dies), but wants to negate or dissolve a conflict that the novel leaves emphatically unresolved?

This interpretive strategy, which I offer as paradigmatic of a paranoid yet normalizing one, "resolves" the contradictions of the monologic narrative of the master plot of History--the crucial points where the retroactive utopian potential resides. The paranoid strategies of interpretation that relentlessly connect the unconnected, imposing a narrative telos that the text initially promises but finally withholds, ignore the salient feature of an equally paranoid text: the three plots of Cities of the Red Night never achieve closure because they can never arrive at narrative stasis. Instead, they are always expanding as more and more paranoid

connections are offered, propelling a seemingly infinite trajectory of continuous primary plots while generating equally infinite trajectories of seemingly multitudinous subplots.

Because in Cities of the Red Night it becomes increasingly difficult to determine the narratological status of each chapter (that is, which is part of a putative central plot and which is part of a subplot or subplots), it seems misguided to distinguish "reality" chapters as norms for determining which chapters are "unreal." None of the novel's three plots can be isolated as the epistemological or ontological norm against which to verify readings of the other plots. Rather than following the standards of traditional detective fiction, Burroughs's textual strategies deliberately undermine the cause-and-effect certainties of a cohesive and unitary world-view when they destabilize the solidity of the fictional universe, making Cities of the Red Night typical of much "meta-detective fiction," as Douglas Keesey terms it.[16] The quest for an uncontaminated space may be the great theme of Burroughs' texts, both fiction and nonfiction, public and private, but this novel acknowledges that that quest is greatly compromised.

---

[16] Arguing that in such fiction paranoia is shown to be more culturally integrative than oppositional, Keesey regards Burroughs as an "immediate ancestor" of an emerging anti-epistemological tradition of postmodern detective fiction that includes Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Walter Abish, and Paul Auster ("The Ideology of Detection in Pynchon and DeLillo," Pynchon Notes 32-33 [Spring-Fall 1993]: 52).

Nostalgia, the Dead End of Conspiracy Narrative, and the Open Horizon of History

Clem Snide, the private investigator who inhabits the plot of Cities of the Red Night's detective story, identifies himself in hard-boiled fashion as "a private asshole" rather than a private eye: "The name is Clem Williamson Snide. I am a private asshole" (44). An affectless narrator, he institutes an "inverted providentiality"--that is, not the "view from above" but that from below. The eye of the omniscient narrator, according to Wayne Pounds, is here replaced by the "anus as point of view" (222). Clem Snide is a conspiracy-hound on the track of the nefarious Countess Minsky Stahlinhof de Gulpa, who "is a very big operator indeed. She owns immense estates in Chile and Peru and has some secret laboratories there. She has employed biochemists and virologists. Indication: genetic experiments and biologic weapons" (53). But he does not discover the source of the conspiracy behind "Virus B-23"; instead, he discovers the more shocking truth that there is no source. Given a copy of a text entitled Cities of the Red Night, he is hired to find the original: "Changes, Mr. Snide, can only be effected by alterations in the original. The only thing not prerecorded in a prerecorded universe are the prerecordings themselves. The copies can only repeat themselves word for word. A virus is a copy. You can pretty it up, cut it up, scramble it--it will reassemble in the same form" (151).

But Clem Snide will instead only produce carefully made counterfeits because, as Burroughs's reliance on intertextuality insists, there are no originals. "We are the language"

reads the title of the chapter in which this scene occurs. Just as Burroughs's earlier cut-ups emphasized that the text is a tissue of citations within an infinite network of the already written, as Robin Lydenberg argues, so too in this supposedly more conventional novel nothing can have the status of original in a prerecorded universe. In Burroughs's fictional world "there are no originals, only copies," Steven Shaviro observes, and Clem Snide's effort to confound the power of the conspiracy by producing a forgery in place of the original is ineffectual because it merely replicates the logic of the prerecordings: "All of Burroughs' strategies for opposing control are thus finally recuperated within the space of control" (202). The private asshole's professional paranoia, in other words, assimilates him to his world rather than alienates him. Thus it is debatable whether the carnivalesque function of what Pounds calls "the postmodern anus" is as radical as assumed by Lydenberg, Burroughs's most sensitive critic, when she offers the notorious "talking asshole" routine of Naked Lunch as paradigmatic of his experimentalism:

> Burroughs' strategy of resistance is to open many orifices, many holes which would dissolve and disseminate the tyranny of the single hole. . . . Burroughs will attempt to generate an indeterminate flux through an infinite number of textual breaks, gaps, and holes, liberating the evolutionary potential of both word and body. (Word Cultures 29)

Burroughs's valorization of the asshole may be shocking to a constipated public but, as Pounds concedes, even a normally unmentionable hole may also come to operate textually as a unifying whole (222).[17]

What is scandalous about Cities of the Red Night in the context of Burroughs's previous texts is its acknowledgment that there is no neutral space or ideological clean slate, an acknowledgment made explicit with some poignancy in the next two novels that conclude this last trilogy. Cities of the Red Night again offers the now familiar metaphor of the virus as a mechanism of ideological control. The fascistic Doctor Pierson has been experimenting with Virus B-23 as a method, in his words, of "circumvent[ing] the whole tedious problem

---

[17] This homogenizing process is also made clear in David Cronenberg's Naked Lunch (1991), a cinematic conflation of Burroughs's most famous novel, his autobiographical Queer (1985), and Ted Morgan's biography, Literary Outlaw. Cronenberg likes to present himself as a Canadian film-maker outside the mainstream of the American entertainment industry, and thus free to make films independent of the hegemonic pull of Hollywood. But as Richard Dellamora argues, Cronenberg's Naked Lunch systematically de-queers the anus as point of view when the special-effects rendering of the talking asshole routine is offered as a self-consciously auteuristic flourish. Moreover, through a relentlessly psychologizing and normalizing series of strategic substitutions, the postmodern anus is replaced by the modernist eye, a substitution underscored by Cronenberg's lingering close-ups on the glittering eye-glasses of Bill Lee, the film's protagonist. Queer difference is recuperated when it is naturalized through individual psychology in which homosexuality is both explained and finally erased under the rubric of heterosexual truth. Because Cronenberg domesticates the deliberately perverse figure of Burroughs to the familiar "mythic figure of the artist-in-revolt," in the words of Dellamora, the "closure that Cronenberg effects in this way paradoxically renders the thematic of the film not postmodernist but modernist" (150). The Bill Lee/William Burroughs figure (to which Dellamora adds the auteur Cronenberg) becomes again the questing hero in pursuit of a veiled truth that, reassuringly, can be penetrated by the paranoid eye.

of overpopulation" (33), hinting that it might be a valuable means of eradicating troublesome Third-World populations abroad as well as a way to counter domestic protest at home when it "quiet[s] the uh silent majority, who are admittedly becoming uh awkward" (33). But unlike the viral agents of the previous texts, this virus has no alien source.

Pierson's assumptions that the virus is containable are questioned by another scientist, Peterson, who stresses that Virus B-23 has no apparent cause. It might not have "resulted from unknown radiation"; instead, it "may have been latent or it may have been living in benign symbiosis with the host" (35). In other words, Virus B-23 has neither source nor cause "because it is the human virus" (36). If, following the logic of the earlier novels, this virus produces subjectivity, it cannot be distinguished from its host. Because subjectivity "has no existence prior to the virus which it harbors," as Shaviro notes, then to be "'tainted with viral origins' is to discover that one's interiority is always already contaminated by external forces" (198). As Cities of the Red Night comes to suggest, in spite of its opening apocalyptic invocations and plot-driven promises of an equally apocalyptic rupture into an unambiguous disclosure of an untainted truth, the desire for a radical space free of ideological contamination might be a desire structured by that same ideology: there simply is no pure space that exists either before or after viral contamination.[18]

---

[18] Fenster suggests how conspiracy theory is available to ideological formation and containment when he notes that it is animated by a potentially destabilizing desire: "Based on a circular drive to find the 'truth'--a kind of epistemophilia--such interpretation becomes akin to the Lacanian notion of desire, which requires, at its core, that its ultimate fulfillment be

A virus that has no determinate source raises the question of origins. The conspiracy-thinking enacted in the triple narrative teleology of Cities of the Red Night is confounded when confronted with the possibility that there is no nexus of power, no single source to the contaminants of ideological influence. During a conversation about a suspicious plane crash, Colonel Dimitri warns Clem Snide that his detective's program of uncovering the layers of deception to reveal the original truth is misguided. In answer to Snide's belief that the disaster was masterminded by a conspiracy of "old enemies," Dimitri argues:

> Look at it this way: You are retained to find a killer. You turn up a hired assassin. You are not satisfied. You want to find the man who hired him. You find another servant. You are not satisfied. You find another servant, and another, right up to Mr. or Mrs. Big--who turns out to be yet another servant . . . a servant of forces and powers you cannot reach. Where do you stop? Where do you draw the line? (85, Burroughs's ellipsis)

Power is everywhere, yet its sources are nowhere. And because its sources are unidentifiable, the conventional cause-and-effect of history is represented not as a progression toward a

---

continually deferred" (89). Furthermore, should the conspiracy theory arrive at a disclosure that might constitute its narrative end, it will likely refuse it; instead, it will reconstruct its frame with new details (91). Conspiracy narratives confront what Žižek describes as "precisely the problem of the 'fulfilment of desire'." When we encounter something that possesses all the features of the fantasized object of desire, we are invariably disappointed, he writes: "it becomes evident that the finally found real object is not the reference of desire even though it possesses all the required properties" (91-92).

teleological goal but as a series of viral mutations, resulting in repetition (Shaviro 198). The draft riots of nineteenth-century New York City, for example, in which those on the bottom of the economic ladder were encouraged to attack "alien" immigrants hoping to gain a foothold, repeat or prefigure events in ancient (but possibly future) Tamaghis, one of the Cities of the Red Night (198-202). History itself is a vast conspiracy concludes Audrey, ostensibly the most heroic of Burroughs's three protagonists, when he assumes that "he knew its purpose, knew the reason for suffering, fear, sex, and death. It was all intended to keep human slaves imprisoned in physical bodies while a monstrous matador waved his cloth in the sky, sword ready for the kill" (267). But that conclusion, too, is soon questioned.

Because the contaminating virus that inaugurated human consciousness has no clear source, history becomes a process without beginning and without end. The model of history as a teleological progression of events toward a determinate end is called into question by Burroughs. Thus utopia, conventionally understood as a future achievement, is presented in Cities of the Red Night as a past moment of potentiality. In the chapter that introduces the subject of Virus B-23, "Politics here is death," the virus that gave birth to human consciousness and hence inaugurated history may have been triggered from its latency by a meteor that brought with it radiation--a beginning that institutes an end. However, the chapter also posits that the unlocatable source of the virus was not a cataclysmic meteor blast, whose evidence is a vast crater in Siberia, "but a black hole, a hole in the fabric of reality" (37). That ambiguous black hole, whose hypothetical existence negates any certainty of a

historical end, is purposely recalled at the novel's equally ambiguous ending that, instead of providing the apocalyptic revelation of the end, gestures both toward the past and a catastrophic future:

> I have blown a hole in time with a firecracker. Let others step through. Into what bigger and bigger firecrackers? Better weapons led to better and better weapons, until the earth is a grenade with the fuse burning.
>
> I remember a dream of my childhood. I am in a beautiful garden. As I reach out to touch the flowers they whither under my hands. A nightmare feeling of foreboding and desolation comes over me as a great mushroom-shaped cloud darkens the earth. A few may get through the gate in time. Like Spain, I am bound to the past. (287)

Just as subjectivity is never free of the contamination of ideology, so too is utopia never free of the complications of history. Noah Blake's successful experiments with gun-powder and small arms during his sojourn in the wild-boys commune have historic consequences: utopia's corruption has internal rather than external causes. That is, utopia is not "beyond" or "outside" history; it is produced, just as it is destroyed, by human action <u>in</u> history.

Noah Blake (whose name has significant apocalyptic associations) tries unsuccessfully to remember a prelapsarian time of a now lost innocence. But these final paragraphs indicate that there is no going back. Thus I do not think that the nostalgia that permeates the ending of <u>Cities of the Red Night</u> indicates a simple-minded yearning for an idealized and illusory past

that incapacitates present action. As the novel insists, there is no original wholeness. Rather, I want to suggest that this obvious nostalgia is both in response to the political dead-end of conspiracy theory and maintained as a way to avoid the hope-less cynicism that can accompany paranoia.[19] For, having finally rejected conspiracy theory as a narrative means of thinking about the end, Cities of the Red Night attempts to retain its utopian impulse.[20]

Burroughs's friend and editor Grauerholz suggested the utopian element that animates Cities of the Red Night when he remarked in an interview that the novel "rewrites history to eliminate the 'shits' from history," revealing a good deal of Burroughs's "nostalgie de la boue for the 'state of nature'" (Zurbrugg 24). As the novel's concluding paragraphs indicate, that nostalgia maintains a strong influence in Cities of the Red Night, as it maintained a strong influence in many of Burroughs's previous texts. But unlike the earlier novels, Cities of the Red Night acknowledges that that "state of nature" is impossible either to achieve or return to because it may be an ideological construction. Yet the different function of nostalgia in this

---

[19]Fenster describes the narratives offered by some contemporary conspiracy theories as "ironic apocalypse" that responds to an "unavoidable end with distance and cynicism" (225). He argues that the playfulness of ironic apocalypse represents at its best a challenging cultural practice; at its worst, however, it often represents an abandonment of political agency (219).

[20] Lydenberg believes that this impulse is abandoned in the later novels that complete the trilogy. In her review of The Western Lands she notes that the "earlier novels often intone a nostalgic litany of farewells to the past or telegraph urgent messages of an apocalyptic or utopian future." In the final novel, however, "it is finally clear that 'There is no transport out. There isn't any important assignment,' there is only an aimless itinerary of dead-end excursions" ("'El Hombre Invisible,'" in William S. Burroughs at the Front, ed. Skerl and Lydenberg, 235).

text has been overlooked. Frederick Dolan, for example, places the plots of the last trilogy squarely within the tradition of Mark Twain's Huck Finn lighting out for the Territory. He argues that in The Western Lands Burroughs relies upon the "nostalgic--and quintessentially American--notion of freedom as the discovery of empty space, a place of innocence outside history where the fundamentally new and original may at last emerge" (548). Certainly, Burroughs writes within the tradition outlined by Leslie Fiedler's Love and Death in the American Novel (and the notorious misogyny of his textual utopias can be understood not as a world-without-women but as a world-without-mother and her "sivilizing" rules and standards). But, by assuming that nostalgia is necessarily symptomatic of an ideological blindspot, Dolan is perhaps too quick to conclude that "ideology plays a more powerful role in Burroughs's fantasies than he otherwise cares to admit" (548).

Rather than regarding the nostalgia simply as a conditioned reflex to authority, it is worth recalling Burroughs's opening description of a historical utopian moment that, once recalled, is potentially retroactive. The novel's nostalgia, in other words, is not for what might have been but for what once was--and might yet be again.[21] Steven Shaviro sees a parallel between it and the text's utopian elements. He argues that the nostalgia that suffuses the final

---

[21] James Berger, whose discussion of Vineland I will turn to below, argues that nostalgia is not always necessarily reactionary; it can also be forward-looking as a "nostalgia for the future, for possibilities of social harmony glimpsed at crucial moments in the past but not yet realized" (171). This understanding of nostalgia as a means of recovering, in retrospect, specific utopian moments in history helps to explain what Burroughs means by a "retroactive utopia."

paragraphs of Cities of the Red Night is not a rejection of the future but an affirmation of an open historical horizon, for with the utopian impulse it "is a movement never to be consummated, but also, in its perpetual incompletion, recurrent and unavoidable" (206). Recognizing the ideological foreclosure often at work in narratives of apocalyptic disclosure, Burroughs's novel closes by endorsing the utopian possibilities implicit in the endlessness of the narrative end.[22]

There is, finally, an ethical urgency to the concluding paragraphs of Cities of the Red Night. In the image of the mushroom cloud Burroughs presents a truly apocalyptic end of history. The text's nostalgia for a past utopia is, in part, a response to this threat, but it does not indicate a demoralized retreat into a consoling fantasy of a golden age--a regression into the past that denies historical agency by turning its back on the future. Rather, it suggests a willingness to persist in the face of such a threat. In comparison to the certainties of apocalyptic history, this is always a provisional practice that offers a tentative hope. But the alternative that Cities of the Red Night examines and works through, a conspiracy narrative

---

[22] The reputation of Burroughs the literary outlaw is not immune to the manipulative uses of nostalgia when he becomes a cultural icon of consumption. Vince Passaro reports that the first book about Burroughs published after his death is not a critical retrospective but, in the words of its publisher, "the first photographic biography of the father of the beats." The contagion of the totalizing culture that his texts consistently resist, Passaro writes, has overtaken Burroughs: "his voice has been muted by his own image, and he has been neutralized in a halo of Beat-i-tude" ("The Forgotten Killer," Harper's Magazine April 1998: 76). His outlaw image, moreover, is reproduced in television commercials for Nike in the US (Passaro 71) and for Pepe Jeans in the UK (Ward 339).

that is revealed to be part of the dominant ideological order rather than a challenge to it, is ultimately rejected as a politically and culturally impotent means of achieving a desired utopian end of history.

Pragmatic Paranoia and the Recovery of History: Vineland

Vineland shares with Thomas Pynchon's previous novels the central concerns of paranoia and apocalyptic disclosure, historical redemption and preterition. Yet what is new in this novel is the depreciation of the apocalyptic gestures that earlier accompanied these concerns. Imminent catastrophe frames Gravity's Rainbow (1973) while the possibility of a final disclosure of the revelatory truth ends The Crying of Lot 49 (1966). But in Vineland both the threat of doom and the promise of revelation, what Gravity's Rainbow terms "clear happiness or redeeming cataclysm" (738), are not given the resonant, even metaphysical, ambiguity of the previous texts. Instead, they are purposefully deflated into the commonplace of the here and now, a reflection of the "mature" disdain for such forms of closure Pynchon displayed in his preface to Slow Learner (1984), where he describes "the apocalyptic showdown" as an "attractive nuisance so dear to adolescent minds" (18). In Pynchon's rejection of apocalyptic closure is a refusal of the closed horizon of history as well as a recognition of the ideological uses to which apocalyptic structures are available. Whether

understood as the revelation of a determinate, originary truth or the uncovering of an imminent, calamitous end, apocalypse has a problematic status because Vineland presents an America whose history has been dissolved in a hyperreal seriality of "Tubal" reruns that constitutes an endlessness of the present. With this refusal of apocalyptic closure, moreover, is the rejection of conspiracy theory, not because conspiracies do not exist--Vineland contains many--but because conspiracy-thinking's model of a hidden but locatable center of power has been superseded by a new form of power that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.

Even though Vineland foregoes the power-model of conspiracy theory, it retains its utopian impulse. Paranoid suspicion is again present in this novel, yet it is now accompanied by nostalgia. This may seem an odd association, but in Pynchon's presentation paranoia and nostalgia are linked in a political practice of some urgency. The absent, "secret" knowledge that is pursued in Vineland is not so much concealed from sight as it is hidden from historical memory. That knowledge is, moreover, an open secret. Like Burroughs, Pynchon presents a paranoia that is generally more integrative than oppositional, but Vineland does not entirely dismiss its political efficacy when it also suggests the value of a "pragmatic" paranoia informed by genuine historical knowledge.[23]

---

[23] David Cowart describes this paranoia as "domesticated": "The paranoia in Vineland is rooted in the political here and now. It becomes less metaphysical, more local" ("Continuity and Growth: Pynchon's Vineland," Kenyon Review 12 [Fall 1990]: 178). See also Marc Conner, "Postmodern Exhaustion: Thomas Pynchon's Vineland and the Aesthetic of the Beautiful," Studies in American Fiction 24 (Spring 1996): 74-76; and Edward Mendelson, "Levity's Rainbow," rev. of Vineland, New Republic 9 and 16 July 1990: 44.

Hanjo Berressem observes that "power is the central theme of Vineland, a book that constantly asks how political power operates and what its effects are" (206). Many of the novel's reviewers were surprised by the apparently new interest of Pynchon in the workings of power, and either ridiculed the text's examination of contemporary American political power as the nostalgic meanderings of an out-of-date lefty or expressed astonishment that the by now characteristic paranoia of his previous writings might well have political implications beyond the formal epistemological and ontological questions those texts raised.[24] Yet nostalgia and paranoia, Vineland suggests, are not always or necessarily regressive responses to the realities of power. Rather, it offers them as countertactics to a form of power that assures its audience that all that is good, valuable, or desirable is materially visible in the present, and thus there is no need to look elsewhere or think otherwise.

Set at the critical juncture between the two Reagan administrations of the 1980s, Vineland examines the consequences of the debilitation and co-option of the radical movements of the 1960s in the strategic amnesia promoted by Ronald Reagan and the political constituencies that brought him to power. In the novel's first chapter DEA field agent Hector Zuñiga tells Zoyd Wheeler: "it's no game in Washington . . . this ain't tweakin around no more with no short-term maneuvers here, this is a real revolution, not that little fantasy hand-job

---

[24] Douglas Keesey shows in his reception study of Vineland that both groups tended to depoliticize the novel ("Vineland in the Mainstream Press," Pynchon Notes 26-27 [Spring-Fall 1990]: 107-13).

you people was into, is it's a groundswell, Zoyd, the wave of History, and you can catch it, or scratch it" (27). In this logic (given full expression at the end of the decade by Francis Fukuyama), one either rides the wave of a Cold-War defined History to its triumphant end or, in the name of historical necessitarianism, be consigned to its dustbin. Not only did Reaganism divide history into winners and losers, a division that helped to characterize both its foreign and domestic policies (and "loser" was a popular term of contempt during the latter half of the 1980s), but it claimed mastery of history through its deployment of politics as spectacle.[25]

Political Spectacle, Historical Amnesia, and Paranoid Integration

The Reagan decade displayed a transformation in the representation and understanding of power when it relied on simulational spectacle not as a method of camouflaging "real" politics but as a means of performing it. Ronald Reagan was not so much "the Acting

---

[25] Keith Jenkins points to the presumed division between "winners" and "losers" in this view of history: it is a history that "is (allegedly) going somewhere, so that 'it doesn't pay' to hang around." Moreover, it has real victims (the "losers" who, according to what Jenkins terms "History-as-alibi," have only themselves to blame): "This is a heavily productivist, developmental imaginary that, western and male-driven, has excluded as the main beneficiaries just about nine-tenths of the world, including most women" (Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity [London and New York: Routledge, 1999], 171).

President" as Gore Vidal liked to call him, but the Hyperreal President. Nancy Reagan tried to defend her husband from those who suspected that Reagan's media-saturated presidency was a public-relations ruse meant to divert critical attention from White House subterfuge when she insisted: "There are not two Ronald Reagans. There is a certain cynicism in politics. But it takes people a while to realize that with Ronnie you don't have to look in back of anything."[26] Intended as a tribute to Reagan's ingenuousness, her words instead suggest a crucial feature of the Reagan years: a presidency that relied on spectacle not as a means of distracting attention away from the real but as a means of constructing the real.[27]

---

[26] Quoted in Michael Rogin, "Ronald Reagan," the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology (Berkeley: U California P, 1987), 7. One defining moment of the shift to simulational spectacle was the 1984 Republican convention in Dallas when Nancy Reagan, after exhorting her audience with the movie reference, "Let's make it one more for the Gipper," turned toward the giant screen behind her and exchanged waves with her husband who, on that screen, was watching her watch him. Rogin describes this scene as "an infinite regression that drew the convention and television audience into the picture, identifying that audience as one of and as subject to the one of itself it was watching" ("'Make My Day!': Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics," Representations 29 [Winter 1990]: 101). The blurring at the Dallas convention of the historic and the mythic, the real and the simulated, is discussed in some detail in Rogin, "Ronald Reagan," the Movie, 39-43; and in Gary Wills, Reagan's America: Innocents at Home (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 200-02. See also the essays collected in Gore Vidal's Armageddon? (London: André Deutsch, 1987).

[27] Guy Debord describes this as the society of the spectacle, in which watching replaces living and politics is a spectator sport: "The spectacle is the existing order's uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue. It is the self-portrait of power in the epoch of its totalitarian management of the conditions of existence" (Society of the Spectacle [Detroit: Red and Black, 1977], sec. 24. See also Jean Baudrillard, Simulations (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), and "The Ecstasy of Communication," in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay), 126-34. Both Debord and Baudrillard need to be read with some skepticism, however, when they suggest that the

Reagan's America was not simply the society of the spectacle as conventionally understood, in which power is concentrated in an identifiable core of a wealthy or military elite, for the diversionary tactic of bread and circuses assumes a relatively stable reality when it offers spectacular productions to divert the masses from the political status quo. That form of society is often overtly authoritarian when it relies on the conventional means of state repression: political propaganda, institutional regulation, bureaucratic surveillance and control, and--most especially--the threat of state violence carried out by the police or military. Such open forms of coercion do not primarily characterize simulational politics (although they are nonetheless always present); instead, the individual is not diverted from the real or intimidated into denying it but participates in its production. In Vineland the object of this production is history and its means are film and especially television.

Vineland confronts the dilemma of the dispersal of power in which the historical individual, caught in a seemingly endless circulation of simulacra, is also a participant in what Michael Rogin terms "amnesiac representation" and "spectacle as amnesia." Intense, pleasurable, and always repeatable, amnesiac representation works to construct a perpetual

---

simulacrum has entirely colonized the real, becoming wholly auto-referential.

I should make clear that I do not intend a criticism of Reaganism for relying on political spectacle. That reliance is nothing new: politics and spectacle have a lengthy historical association (see Patrick Brantlinger, Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay [Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1983]). What was new was not the theatricality of Reaganism's spectacle but the communicative form in which it was deployed, making its audience both viewers and participants in the construction of a mythic America.

present that forgets the past and forecloses the future by disavowing real and continuing historical problems.[28] Recalling the insights gained through their experiments with LSD, insights that questioned the state's "power of life and death," Zoyd Wheeler tells Mucho Maas that, although "they" can take away the drugs, "they can't take what happened, what we found out." But Mucho believes that counter-cultural knowledge has already been dissipated in the literally endless flow of simulated events provided by the media: "Easy. They just let us forget. Give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it's what the

---

[28] Rogin argues that Reaganism as both political doctrine and cultural expression, in disavowing real domestic problems (other than what it perceived as "big government," crime, and a vaguely defined "permissiveness"), relied on the highly visible--spectacle--to render urgent problems invisible--amnesia. It promoted a political and historical amnesia that works "not simply through burying history but also through representing the return of the repressed. An easily forgettable series of surface entertainments--movies, television series, political shows--revolve before the eye. The scopic pleasure in their primal, illegitimate scenes produces infantile amnesia once the images themselves threaten to enter the lasting, symbolic realm. The recovery of historical memory exposes these processes" ("'Make My Day!'" 106). The aim of Rogin's discussion is to show how the conventional distinction between mass spectacle and covert operations--what is usually understood to be, on the one hand, the open, and, on the other, the concealed--was dissolved in the new simulational representation of power in the 1980s (a new representation, moreover, that was normalized under George Bush's presidency; see Rogin's "Sequel" appended to the republication of his article in Cultures of United States Imperialism, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease [Durham and London: Duke UP, 1993]: 499-534). I will return to Rogin's important emphasis on how the covert, the always elusive object of conspiracy narrative, is part of, and not concealed by, the politics of spectacle; here, however, I want to note that his stress on Reaganism's practice of "spectacle as amnesia"--a promotion of History without consequences--is similar to Eric Santner's notion of narrative fetishism: of how historical narratives that aim to disavow the importance of past traumas can simulate a social and cultural intactness that overcomes, in fantasy, the rift between the present and the past without having to risk the difficult questions about the future both present and past conditions impose.

Tube is for, and though it kills me to say it, it's what rock and roll is becoming--just another way to claim our attention, so that beautiful certainty we had starts to fade" (314). Unlike in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four, both an important intertext to the novel and an ominous date that, announced in the text's opening sentence, resounds throughout it, repression in Vineland is not merely the authoritarian voice that says "No"; it is also the Tubal voice that allows dissent, even encouraging it, only finally to recuperate it in spectacular forms of leisurely entertainment (and hence outside the "real" and valued time of work).[29] Nor is it just the panoptical eye that always reminds you that you are being watched; it is also the impersonal, blank gaze of the television screen that does not so much foster the self-surveillance of subversive thought as it works to diffract that thought, diffusing its "realism" in hyperspace.

In Vineland, unlike in Pynchon's previous novels, the protagonist is no longer on a heroic quest for the origins of truth that increasingly confers wise, even mystical, innocence on the individual as he or she soldiers on in the face of a sinister and seemingly omnipotent counterforce or counterplot. The quest plot reappears in Vineland, but its process is not the paranoid discovery of the truth in apocalyptic disclosure; instead, it is the pragmatic paranoid

---

[29] For a discussion of Nineteen Eighty Four's relation to Vineland, as well as the utopian and dystopian elements in Pynchon's novel, see Keith Booker, "Vineland and Dystopian Fiction," Pynchon Notes 30-31 (Spring-Fall 1992): 5-38; Shaskan Bumas, "The Utopian States of America: The People, the Republic, and Rock and Roll in Thomas Pynchon's Vineland," Arizona Quarterly 51 (Autumn 1995): 149-75; and Eva Karpinsky, "From V. to Vineland: Pynchon's Utopian Moments," Pynchon Notes 32-33 (Spring-Fall 1993): 33-43.

recovery of history. The novel presents a thoroughly quotidian world in which the population no longer requires the elaborate apparatus of an external surveillance.

While the paranoid sense of other realities remains in Vineland, it is rendered diffuse. Alternative realities are suggested: Chipco's pirate aircraft, Godzilla, and Big Foot; Dr. Elasmo's otherworldy dentist office; the rain-forest dreamworld Van Meter's children enter; the computer archives at the Kunoichi retreat in which Frenesi and DL complete their actions unobserved; and the "dreamed hillside" (and whose dream?) on which Rex and Weed Atman are reconciled; as well as the Thanatoid communities and the Yurok afterworld. But this time there is no conspiratorial master plot that might unify the various plots and counterplots of Vineland: no V., no Tristero, no Counterforce. There is no "vast conspiratorial umbrella," as Patrick O'Donnell observes of the earlier novels' paranoid structures (190).

But maybe there is; only this time power is not where it is supposed to be. It is not, as Nancy Reagan suggested, hidden or disguised--"in back of anything." Instead, power has no final source or determinate center, thereby still fostering paranoia but also dispersing the energies of its suspicion. Thus in Vineland's opening pages, for example, Zoyd experiences a paranoid premonition oddly diffused by its Tubal terms of reference: "It was like being on 'Wheel of Fortune,' only here there were no genial vibes from any Pat Sajak to find comfort in, no tanned and beautiful Vanna White at the corner of his vision to cheer on the Wheel, to wish him well, to flip over one by one letters of a message he knew he didn't want to read anyway" (12-13). As in the previous texts, paranoia may create communities of the politically

suspicious in Vineland County, "where shadows came early and brought easy suspicion of another order of things" (22). But in this novel, which constantly reminds its reader of the omnipresence of a televisual logic that makes privacy and the political secret things of the past, potential political energies are diffracted not from a hidden conspiracy but from the open secret that there is no inner core of concealed power from which paranoid attention must be deflected. One urgent question debated at the Traverse-Becker reunion that closes the novel is left unanswered, possibly because it is unanswerable:

> And other grandfolks could be heard arguing the perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago, and the light they thought they saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same bright-colored shadows. One by one, as other voices joined in, the names began--some shouted, some accompanied by spit, the old reliable names good for hours of contention, stomach distress, and insomnia--Hitler, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Hoover, Mafia, CIA, Reagan, Kissinger, that collection of names and their tragic interweaving that stood not constellated above in any nightwide remoteness of light, but below, diminished to the last <u>unfaceable</u> American secret, to be pressed, each time deeper, again and again beneath the meanest of random soles, one blackly fermenting leaf on the forest floor that

> nobody wanted to turn over, because of all that lived, virulent, waiting, just beneath. (371-72, emphasis added)

The sources of power are not constellated above in a remote conspiratorial network, making the last American secret "unfaceable": although individuals can be identified, there is no locatable conspiracy to which to give a face or name, thereby complicating the dilemma of how to resist a power that has no discernible source.

Vineland traces the transformation of state control from the overt authoritarianism and covert conspiracies of the "Nixonian Repression" (71) to the Orwellian and real-life Office of Public Diplomacy instituted in the Reagan years. Vineland presents state power in the 1960s as openly violent: "War in Vietnam, murder as an instrument of American politics, black neighborhoods torched to ashes and death" (38). Paranoia also becomes a means of control. Not only do the CIA and FBI spread "the merciless spores of paranoia" so that betrayal is routine (239), but Rex's paranoid practice of "progressive abstinence" results in a self-surveillance so complete that external coercion is unnecessary: "as the enemy's attention grew more concentrated, you gave up your privacy, freedom of movement, access to money, with the looming promise always of jail and the final forms of abstinence from any life at all free of pain" (229-30). Mucho Maas foresees a future of expanded control when he warns Zoyd that after the Nixon Years will come the Reagan Years: "soon they're gonna be coming after everything, not just drugs, but beer, cigarettes, sugar, salt, fat, you name it, anything that could remotely please any of your senses, because they need to control all that" (313). But

after Nixon, as the Repression continues "growing wider, deeper," it is "less visible, regardless of the names in power" (72). Just as the distinctions between informant and informed upon become less visible in the interconnections of power ("Everybody's a squealer," Flash thinks; "We're in th' Info Revolution here" [74]), so too are the boundaries between viewer and viewed dissolved: "As if the Tube were suddenly to stop showing pictures and instead announce, 'From now on, I'm watching you'" (340). Pynchon suggests that the process of integration is nearly complete when Brock Vond's PREP (Political Re-Education Program), whose secret detention camp held radical students during the 1960s, has been declared redundant in the 1980s because government control has been normalized and internalized. Beginning about 1981, according to Hector, "kids were comin in all on their own askin about careers, no need for no separate facility anymore" (347).

The dominant metaphor for political and cultural integration in Vineland is television. Isaiah Two Four tells Zoyd:

> Whole problem 'th you folk's generation . . . is you believed in your Revolution, put your lives right out there for it--but you sure didn't understand much about the Tube. Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, that whole alternative America, el deado meato, just like th' Indians, sold it all to your real enemies. (373)

Its ubiquitous presence within the novel, both as an object and as a means of representation, suggests that television is here an instrument of social control. Yet I hesitate to designate it as such because to do so would assume that TV functions as a distraction that, like the political practice of bread and circuses, diverts critical attention from the real. Noam Chomsky makes precisely this assumption in his discussion of the actions of the Reagan and Bush presidencies as a series of media-events staged for public consumption. Arguing that the control of thought is more crucial to freely elected governments than to autocratic regimes, he writes: "As long as each individual is facing the television tube alone, formal freedom poses no threat to privilege" (76). While this is not entirely wrong, it suggests that the real is concealed by television, kept out of sight, overlooking how television invites the viewer to partake in the construction of the real. Rather than identifying television as a method of control that deflects attention from political reality, I want to suggest that in Vineland it is both a means of control, although not its source, and a metaphor that "stands in" for a form of dispersed power that, in the politics of the spectacle, often makes use of television.

In both the content and narrative method of Vineland reality is not only mediated by television, but also colonized by it. Television defines conventions of the real when, for example, it replaces clock-time: "It was just before prime time, with the light outdoors not quite gone" (194). Even the ontological boundary of death, the ultimate ground of the real, is penetrated by the hyperreal. As Takeshi Fumimota realizes: "television, which with its

history of picking away at the topic with doctor shows, war shows, cop shows, murder shows, had trivialized the Big D itself. If mediated lives . . . why not mediated deaths?" (218). When death enters the endless circulation of simulacra, it too becomes just another "event" in a series of televisual events.

Television, moreover, conditions subjectivity, becoming the referent for both fears and desires; it does not impose false desires but conditions real ones by providing scenarios for their fulfillment. Prairie, who generally resists the interpellating features of spectacle, scorns the sanitized images of American girlhood promoted by television, yet is drawn to them:

> It didn't help that inside, Prairie liked to imagine herself as just such a figure of luck and grace, no matter what hair, zit, or weight problems might be accumulating in the nonfantasy world. On the Tube she saw them all the time, these junior-high gymnasts in leotards, teenagers in sitcoms, girls in commercials learning from their moms about how to cook and dress and deal with their dads, all these remote and well-off little cookies going "Mm! this rilly <u>is</u> good!" or the ever-reliable "Thanks, Mom," Prairie feeling each time this mixture of annoyance and familiarity, knowing like exiled royalty that that's who she was supposed to be, could even turn herself into through some piece of negligible magic she must've known once but in the difficult years marooned down on this out-of-the-way planet had come to have trouble remembering anymore. (327)

Such narratives, a form of amnesiac representation, speak to desire by providing fantasies of wholeness in which contradictions are raised only to be magically overcome. The problems of the "nonfantasy world" that hover at the edges in this description of TV-America--poverty, racism, sexism, domestic violence and sexual abuse--are resolved by simple denial. Furthermore, problems are presented within the imperatives of a fixed time-frame so that their resolution occurs within a generally predetermined closure. As Prairie escapes Brock Vond's invasion of the Kunoichi Retreat with DL and Takeshi Fumimota, she wishes "they could wake into something more benevolent and be three different people, only some family in a family car, with no problems that couldn't be solved in half an hour of wisecracks and commercials, on their way to a fun weekend at some beach" (191). Television's endless staging of conflict and closure, Pynchon indicates, both speaks to desire and conditions it, even when the viewer knows that it is contrived. This imperative of the frame--that conflicts or problems must be resolved at the end and often by means of the end--is, moreover, analogous to Reaganism's Cold-War frame of history whose triumphal end erases alternative histories by imposing closure to the narrative.

When everybody and everything is on videotape, whether by the video camera, the TV camera, or the surveillance camera, there is no private space, and neither is there a meaningful public one. The public sphere, in the Habermasian sense of an arena distinct from both the state and the market and in which political participation is openly enacted through the medium

of free discussion, becomes a "phantom public sphere" dominated by publicity.[30] Zoyd expresses surprise to Hector about the federal agent's plans to make a movie demonizing the 1960s:

> I don't believe this, you wantin' to be in the world of entertainment, when all along I had you pegged as a real terrorist workin' for the State. When you said cuttin' and shootin' I didt'n know you were talkin' about film. I thought th' only kind of options you cared about were semi- and full automatic. Why, I'm lookin' at Steven Spielberg, here. (52)

But in the political logic of a society of the simulational spectacle, in which power is always performed and consumed, the two occupations are equivalent. In Vineland County the cable

---

[30] Jürgen Habermas's ideal of a fully rational community which, through free and open discussion of public concerns, can reach a consensus regarding standards of truth, and first elaborated in his 1962 The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989]) and reworked in his subsequent books, has been criticized by many, notably Jean-François Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition, where he argues that Habermas's principle of consensus as a criterion of legitimation is based on the metanarrative of emancipation (60-67). Habermas's putative assumption of a single, central public sphere is also critiqued by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their 1972 Public Sphere and Experience (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1993), as well as by some feminist theorists. I do not think that his reliance on a narrative of emancipation automatically disqualifies his ideal of a public sphere, nor do I think that it is as exclusionary as some have charged (it is, I think, potentially inclusive). Furthermore, the ideal of a public sphere already functions, in Nancy Fraser's words, "here and now as a norm of democratic interaction we use to criticize the limitations of actually existing public spheres" ("Rethinking the Public Sphere," in The Phantom Public Sphere, ed. Bruce Robbins [Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1993], 29n15).

television zones "in time became political units in their own right" (319), suggesting that the political is the televisual. So too is history eclipsed by celebrity. Not only do second- or third-rate movie stars assume the lead role in television-biographies of other stars--"Pia Zadora in The Clara Bow Story" (14)--while other stars play political celebrities--"Woody Allen in Young Kissinger" (309) and "Sean Connery in The G. Gordon Liddy Story" (339)--but, following the precessional logic of simulacra, a television game-show host can portray another celebrity whose fame rested on his ability to mimic still other celebrities--"Pat Sajak in The Frank Gorshin Story" (48). All are equivalent in an endless recycling of televised fame and fortune. The past and the future are dissolved into a televisual present, suggesting Vineland's version of preterition: the inertia of an absent history.

This televisual penetration of the imagination is reproduced in the narrative method of the novel. Not only do characters frequently refer to the television for examples of standard behavior, but the narrator also draws on television programs as a source of metaphors. Zoyd's usual troubles, for instance, are described as "those times when the Klingons are closing, and the helm won't answer, and the warp engine's out of control" (285). Pynchon has been criticized for the scant critical distance between the Tubal immersion of Vineland's characters and that of their narrator, for apparently being seduced and therefore corrupted by the false and distorting images of the media. Pynchon's critical attention, in other words, has been diverted from the real and, therefore, the socially, culturally, and

politically pertinent.[31] But this criticism, by assuming that television is only a degenerate form of entertaining distraction, minimizes or ignores the pleasures of Pynchon's Tubal-saturated prose. The cultural fantasies signalled by the "Star Trek" vocabulary that describes Zoyd's predicaments may be regressive, but the laughter that description provokes suggests that something more complicated is at work in this novel. Earlier I proposed that television is a metaphor in Vineland for a form of political power that cannot be described within the conventional distinctions between public and private, inside and outside, overt and covert, real and unreal. This is not to say that those distinctions are obsolete and ought to be discarded, and that nothing is any longer real. I want to suggest here that Pynchon's TV-immersed prose can be understood as indicating a struggle for interpretive power about precisely what is real, for what Reaganism rendered unreal (or tried to render as such) is historical memory. As the

---

[31] Joseph Tabbi, for example, regards Vineland as a capitulation to the simulation culture it documents ("Pynchon's Groundward Art," in The Vineland Papers, ed. Geoffrey Green, Donald J. Greiner, and Larry McCaffery [Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994], 89-100). A similar charge is made in Brad Leithauser's review ("Anyplace You Want," New York Review of Books, 15 March 1990: 7-10). See also Alan Wilde's criticism of Pynchon for "trivializing" ideological co-option by presenting it in the language and images of contemporary popular culture: "Vineland seems from time to time to become what it beholds: a busy, pop version of America more attentive to momentary surfaces than to depth. It follows that Pynchon's insistent suggestions of mysterious and possibly redemptive dimensions beyond the two-dimensional tubal world lack sufficient contextual support. Whatever their local and occasional energy, these references appear unintegrated; and the possibility of 'that whole alternative America' sinks under the insubstantial weight of TV culture" ("Love and Death in and around Vineland, U.S.A.," Boundary 2 18 [Summer 1991]: 174-75, emphasis added). That lack of integration, however, might be a strength. Vineland rejects the apocalyptic model of conspiracy theory because, as it indicates, paranoia is often integrative, easily becoming a form of "cooperative resistance."

compromised Frenesi Gates wonders: "How could we lose track like that, about what was real?" (259).

Motivated Disavowal, Regression, and History Without Consequences

The simulational spectacle deployed by Reaganism also entailed an attempt at a symbolic restoration of history to its rightful ownership, thereby putting America back on track in its steady progress toward the end of history. Part of the neoconservative agenda of the 1980s aimed to reverse the representations of America's past and present generated by the civil rights struggles and protest movements of the 1960s by reconstructing a benignly triumphal past infused with a Norman Rockwell glow.[32] The nation was invited to participate in this mythic history rather than dwell on the actual past. In 1983 Reagan told the American

---

[32] It is worth stressing that historical amnesia was not merely a personal quirk of Reagan's political style (although it was partly that: Rogin argues that Reagan constructed his identity from the roles he played on film: see "Ronald Reagan," the Movie, 1-43); it was also a political program to reconstruct a mythic past. In the 1984 presidential campaign a memo was issued by Assistant White House Chief of Staff Richard Darman instructing speechwriters to portray Reagan "as the personification of all that is right with or heroized by America. Leave Mondale in a position where an attack on Reagan is tantamount to an attack on America's idealized image of itself--where a vote against Reagan is in some subliminal sense, a vote against mythic 'AMERICA'" (quoted in Mike Wallace, "Ronald Reagan and the Politics of History," in Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory [Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996], 255).

Bar Association: "Whatever sad episodes exist in our past, any objective observer must hold a positive view of American history, a history that has been the story of hopes fulfilled and dreams made into reality." This is not simply motivational encouragement to think positively; rather, it is one example of amnesiac representation's motivated disavowal. Past traumas (slavery, for instance) are simultaneously acknowledged and forgotten when they are presented as "sad episodes" that, by not belonging to the happy "story of hopes fulfilled and dreams made into reality," are simply placed outside the narrative of history. Such "sad episodes" did and did not happen, and therefore they can have no lasting effects (racism, for example) that continue in the present. Furthermore, anyone who might point to any of these sad episodes is not an "objective observer" and therefore can be disregarded.[33]

In order to maintain this fantasy of America's intact wholeness, past defeats must also be denied. Vineland's portrayal of the activities of CAMP (Campaign Against Marijuana Production) suggests that the Reagan presidency's "War on Drugs" functioned within the logic of motivated disavowal as an attempt to overcome the "Vietnam Syndrome"--a pathologizing

---

[33] Reagan's speech is quoted by Wallace, who also quotes some of his comments at Bitburg where, initially, Reagan argued against "reawakening the memories" of the Holocaust. "I don't think we ought to focus on the past," he said. "I want to focus on the future. I want to put that history behind me" (251, 253). For a discussion of the statements Reagan made during his 1985 visits to Bergen-Belsen and Bitburg, some of which maintained that the German SS soldiers buried at Bitburg were as much victims as the inmates of Bergen-Belsen (the Holocaust being, in this view, another "sad episode" that both did and did not happen), and how this disturbing example of strategic amnesia formed part of his larger Cold War scenario of historical redemption, see Berger, 146-52.

term for real public memories of a past disaster that might impede future foreign interventions. CAMP is a restaging of the Vietnam War that works both to justify American involvement in Southeast Asia and, this time, to defeat the enemy.[34] In this scenario drugs are a surrogate for communism and, just as HUAC came to Hollywood to investigate communist influence in the movie industry during the early Cold War years, a federal grand jury is "convening to inquire into drug abuse in the picture business" during the later years of Reagan's reinvigorated Cold War (338). "Communists then, dopers now" (339). The process of substitution in the spectacle of symbolic war by proxy is complete when Pynchon's Reagan normalizes the equation in televized campaign speeches praising two producers, Sid Liftoff and Ernie Triggerman (whose surnames evoke Cold War militarism), for making an anti-drug film:

> "Well . . . all I can say iss . . . ," with the practiced shy head-toss of an eternal colt, "if theere'd ben moore Sid Liftoffs and Ernie Triggermans in Hollywood, when I worked theere . . . we might not've had . . . soo minny cahmmunists

---

[34] Pynchon's portrayal of CAMP and its operations, while indicating that the War on Drugs was in part an attempt to recuperate the disaster of Vietnam, also places it in Reaganism's larger Cold War frame of history. That the commander of CAMP is a former Nazi officer of the Luftwaffe "and subsequently useful American citizen" (221), recalls Reagan's infamous assertion at Bitberg that both the United States and Germany were more allies than enemies during World War II in their "shared" battle against "one man's totalitarian dictatorship." For a discussion of how the need to deny defeat in Vietnam informed Reagan's strategically amnesiac speeches at both Bitburg and Normandy, see Berger, 151.

> in the unionss . . . and my jahb might've been a lot eassier . . . ," twinkle. (342, Pynchon's ellipses)

Pynchon's joke, however, is that the grand jury is only a rumor and the as yet unmade movie is part of Sid Liftoff's community service after his arrest for cocaine possession. But, no matter: it becomes an accomplished fact in the politics of amnesiac representation.

The same logic of achieving in fantasy what was not attained in reality characterizes the second and related function of CAMP. After CAMP's strike force of helicopters and armed personnel carriers invades Vineland County, the area becomes, "operationally speaking, the third world" (49), and Zoyd's confiscated house and its surroundings become a Southeast Asian village:

> Leaving only a couple of marshals to guard the house, most of Brock's troops had departed after terrorizing the neighborhood for weeks, running up and down the dirt lanes in formation chanting "War-on-drugs! War-on-drugs!" strip-searching folks in public, killing dogs, rabbits, cats, and chickens, pouring herbicide down wells that couldn't remotely be used to irrigate dope crops, and acting, indeed, as several neighbors observed, as if they had invaded some helpless land far away, instead of a short plane ride from San Francisco. (357)

Vineland County is a surrogate Vietnam which, after its surrender this time, will be incorporated into the fantasyland of Reagan's "America"--a properly domesticated small-town family in which politics has no place:

> Sooner or later Holytail was due for the full treatment [by CAMP], from which it would emerge, like most of the old Emerald Triangle, pacified territory--reclaimed by the enemy for a timeless, defectively imagined future of zero-tolerance drug-free Americans all pulling their weight and all locked in to the official economy, inoffensive music, endless family specials on the Tube, church all week long, and, on special days, for extra-good behavior, maybe a cookie. (221-22)

In this simultaneously banal and sinister resolution to the "noble cause," as Reagan insisted the Vietnam War was, Pynchon identifies both the millennial elements and infantilizing tendencies of spectacle as amnesia.

The millennialism that informed Reaganism is well known; it was apparent not only in the apocalyptic fundamentalism of the New Christian Right, but also in the appeals to a perfect future about to arrive inherent in such diverse items as the Republican campaign slogan "it's morning in America"; Reagan's frequent references to John Winthrop's "City on a Hill"; and the blissful invulnerability promised by Star Wars/SDI.[35] Vineland reveals this

---

[35] See Gary Wills, Reagan's America, 327-388, passim, and Under God: Religion and American Politics, 125-184, passim; O'Leary, Arguing the Apocalypse, 172-93; Berger, After

form of millennialism to be a regressive fantasy rather than a vision of progress. It is, moreover, distinctly authoritarian, as suggested by Pynchon's description of an infantilized population ("pacified territory") receiving a cookie for extra-good behavior. The intimate coziness of Reagan's paternalism, which provides the reassurance of an unthreatening reality, requires thugs like Brock Vond to maintain its power. Vineland indicates their connection by providing a parallel between the two men: like Reagan, Brock aims "to roll back time . . . dismantle the New Deal, reverse the effects of World War II, restore fascism at home and around the world, flee into the past" (265).

This authoritarianism is not concealed, however, because there is no need, Pynchon suggests. The reassurances provided by spectacle as amnesia, the "timeless, defectively imagined future," rely on a "desire not to know," a mass motivated disavowal.[36] Gary Wills

---

the End, 133-68; Quinby, Anti-Apocalypse, ix-xxvii, and Millennial Seduction, 59-116, 125-46; and Paul Boyer, Fallout, 175-81.

[36] Trying to explain why many people were not overly disturbed by Reagan's casual disregard for the distinctions between historical fact and historical fiction (as when, for example, he claimed he was with the Signal Corps when they filmed Nazi death camps), Wallace observes: "The fact is that some Americans gladly jettisoned history and embraced myth because, consciously or unconsciously, doing so supported their relatively privileged position. Ignorance, after all, can be based on a desire not to know" (264, emphasis added). Wills, too, believes that this motivated disavowal stems from a desire not to know. Confronting the past presents too many psychic risks because it means acknowledging responsibility and guilt: "If one settles, instead, for a substitute past, an illusion of it, then that fragile construct must be protected from the challenge of complex or contradictory evidence, from any test of evidence at all. That explains Americans' extraordinary tacit bargain with each other not to challenge Reagan's version of the past. The power of his appeal is the great joint confession that we cannot live with our real past, that we not only prefer but need a substitute" (Reagan's

points to the real pleasures to be experienced by participating in the regressive amnesia generated by Reaganism when he compares a visit to Reaganland to an excursion to Disneyland: "Visiting Reaganland is very much like taking children to Disneyland, where they can deal with a New Orleans cut to their measure. It is a safe past, with no sharp edges to stumble against" (Reagan's America 387). But the price to be paid for the fantasy of a safe and pleasant past, as well as the reassurance of an unthreatening present and a knowable and comfortable future, is a reliance on central power, and even a need for it (Rogin, "'Make My Day!'" 117). Thus Brock Vond's "genius" was to have seen in the sixties counter-culture "not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it," a need to remain infantilized within authoritarian structures: "While the Tube was proclaiming youth revolution against parents of all kinds and most viewers were accepting the story, Brock saw the deep . . . need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family" (269). Instead of Disneyland, however, there is Brock's detention camp, itself a former bomb-shelter (and a sort of inverted Disneyland) whose architecture was "intended to reassure, to discourage too many questions, to turn to use whatever residue of nation-love might be hidden among the tens of thousands of traumatized refugees it had been designed to impress" (255).

This infantilized condition points to the political logic of the "government-defined history without consequences" (354) promoted by spectacle as amnesia. Agency is displaced

---

America 386).

onto the act of watching: watching television, watching movies, and also watching people. Taken to its extreme, moreover, watching people can lead to betraying them. Pynchon examines the consequences of that political logic in the character Frenesi and her collaboration with Brock Vond. Frenesi has apparently inherited from her mother a "uniform fetish" that creates in her, as it did in Sasha, "a helpless turn toward images of authority," seducing and initiating her into "the dark joys of social control" (83). Her attraction to authority sustains her desire to live outside history; that is, to act without having to be responsible for the outcome of the act. Straddling the joy-stick of Brock's erect penis therefore becomes for her not just a source of erotic power but a sense of immunity to the vicissitudes of history:

> hurtling into the future, she would keep trying to steer among the hazards and obstacles, the swooping monsters and alien projectiles of each game she would come, year by year, to stand before, once again out long after curfew, calls home forgotten, supply of coins dwindling, leaning over the bright display among the back aisles of a forbidden arcade, rows of other players silent, unnoticed, closing time never announced, playing for nothing but the score itself, the row of numbers, a chance of entering her initials among those of other strangers for a brief time, no longer the time the world observed but game time, underground time, time that could take her nowhere outside its own tight and falsely deathless perimeter. (293)

Pynchon's extended metaphor of a video arcade game is noteworthy because it suggests the regressive and infantilizing nature of "history without consequences." The genuine pleasure of playing a video game is the experience of performing in fantasy forbidden acts, such as murder, while not having to face real consequences for those acts.[37] Frenesi, who is responsible for Weed Atman's murder, wants to be free of the burdens of history. She regards her servitude to Brock "as the freedom, granted to a few, to act outside warrants and charters, to ignore history and the dead, to imagine no future, no yet-to-be-born, to be able simply to go on defining moments only, purely, by the action that filled them" (71-72). Her ideal is "a world based on the one and zero of life and death" (72). But in between those numbers, as Vineland insists, is history; not the ideologically fetishized History of Reaganism, but the living history of daily experience, its consequences, and its obligations.

---

[37] Frenesi's infantile sense of power is analogous to that experienced by the Christian Right, Pynchon suggests. Rex once warned the members of PR³: "You're up against the True Faith here, some heavy dudes, talking crusades, retribution, closed ideological minds passing on the Christian Capitalist Faith intact, mentor to protégé, generation to generation, living inside their power, convinced they're immune to all the history the rest of us have to suffer" (232). For a discussion of the regressive nature of the fantasies of omnipotence and vengeance that sometimes characterize Christian fundamentalism, see Charles Strozier's Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America.

Pragmatic Paranoia, Utopian Memory, and the Obligations of History

History does have consequences, as DL Chastain knows: "What was she complaining about? Only that acts, deeply moral and otherwise, had consequences" (132). In Vineland the historical past, whose betrayals, crimes, and disasters are disavowed by Reaganism, returns to haunt the present. It dogs Frenesi in almost bodily form. Despite her desire to be immune to history, and despite the culture of amnesia in which she lives and works as a snitch, she cannot forget:

> Frenesi took her hand away from Flash's and they all got back to business, the past, a skip tracer with an obsessional gleam in its eye, and still a step or two behind, appeased for only a little while. Sure, she knew folks who had no problem at all with the past. A lot of it they just didn't remember. Many told her, one way and another, that it was enough for them to get by in real time without diverting precious energy to what, face it, was fifteen or twenty years dead and gone. But for Frenesi the past was on her case forever, the zombie at her back, the enemy no one wanted to see, a mouth wide and dark as the grave. (71)

As the metaphors imply, the past not only haunts the present, it inhabits the present. It takes visible form as the Thanatoids, undead victims of past wrongs that, Pynchon emphasizes,

continue unresolved: "injustices not only from the past but also virulently alive in the present day, like CAMP's promise of a long future of devoted enforcement from the sky" (172). The reference to CAMP is important. Many of the Thanatoids, like Ortho Bob Dulang (whose first name implies "correction"), were in Vietnam, where they were "damaged . . . in more than one way" (174). Vineland suggests that as long as the disaster of that war remains unacknowledged, and is instead restaged and "won" as the War on Drugs, Ortho Bob and the others will not receive the justice, or "karmic balance," they want. Takeshi Fumimota even alludes to the motivated disavowal of those who refuse to confront the unpalatable truths of the past when he explains to DL that their "karmic adjustment" clinic will undertake others' messy business for them: "They'll pay us just like they pay the garbage men from the garbage dump, the plumbers in the septic tank--the mop hands at the toxic spill! They don't want to do it--so we'll do it for them!" (172-73).

Much of Vineland's project is to open the future by retrieving the imperfect past from historical amnesia. The metaphysical paranoia of the earlier novels seeks the discovery of an apocalyptic truth. Another paranoia animates this novel; it is a pragmatic paranoia that seeks the recovery of historical truths. Accompanying this pragamatic paranoia, moreover, is a utopianism that, like Burroughs's, expresses itself through nostalgia.

After Prairie turns off the computer in the Kunoichi library, on whose screen she has been reading Frenesi's file and looking at pictures of the 1960s, one photograph of her mother and DL comes to life:

> Back down in the computer library, in storage, quiescent ones and zeros scattered among millions of others, the two women, yet in some definable space, continued on their way across the low-lit campus, persisting, recoverable, friends by the time of this photo for nearly a year, woven together in an intricacy of backs covered, promises made and renegotiated, annoyances put up with, short-cuts worn in, ESP beyond the doubts of either. (115, emphasis added)

This animated photograph, come to life unnoticed, confirms the paranoid suspicion of other realities. Yet, unlike the alternative worlds glimpsed in the other texts, such as the "hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning" Oedipa Maas experiences in The Crying of Lot 49 (15), there is little sense here of the transcendently beatific or sinister; instead, it is quotidian. The "persisting" and "recoverable" other realm captured in the photograph is, I think, the space of memory. That it should be presented as a weird, other reality is an ironic comment on the historical amnesia of Reagan's simulational politics.

Pynchon indicates here and elsewhere that historical memory can be a form of resistance to spectacle as amnesia. In Hollywood's "Noir Center," a theme-park shopping mall designed to evoke film noir classics, Prairie is angered by its "pseudoromantic mystique" because she knows from her grandparents' experience as blacklisted and graylisted workers "how corrupted everything had really been from top to bottom, as if the town had been a toxic

dump for everything those handsome pictures had left out" (326). Noir Center is typical of Reaganism in more ways than one. It aims to shape consumer desire by evoking "memories" of a fantasy past that existed only in movies, while erasing the "toxic" history behind the making of those films: HUAC, McCarthy, and Hoover. Part of that history, moreover, includes Ronald Reagan. As president of the Screen Actors Guild he was an FBI informant and contributor to the movie industry's blacklist, although he always denied that there was such a thing (and as president of the United States he pointed to his SAG membership as proof that he was a "union man").[38] Prairie's historical knowledge, a living memory transmitted through the generations, resists the seduction of amnesiac representation.

In contrast to the regressive nostalgia promoted by the Reagan administrations and manipulated by such business ventures as the Noir Center, a progressive form of nostalgia also motivates Vineland. James Berger describes it as a "revised nostalgia" that bears a utopian impulse: "Pynchon's nostalgia is a nostalgia for the future, for possibilities of social harmony glimpsed at crucial moments in the past but not yet realized" (171). Part of that utopian

---

[38] See Wills, Reagan's America, 215-58. Of the blacklist, Victor Navasky describes a form of disavowal that resembles Reaganism's strategic amnesia: "nobody wanted to talk out loud about it. Its force came from the mystique that surrounded it. Now you see it, now you don't. The Motion Picture Association of America denied that the industry kept a blacklist, but it said that no Fifth Amendment takers (or First Amendment takers either, for that matter) who hadn't purged themselves before an appropriate congressional committee could work in Hollywood. The Screen Actors Guild (Ronald Reagan speaking) said, 'We will not be party to a blacklist,' but it banned Communists and noncooperative witnesses from membership" (Naming Names 86-87).

program, therefore, is the acknowledgment of disavowed past traumas in order to come to terms with them. DL longs to retreat to the Kunoichi Sisterhood, where she believes her ninja skills belong. But she realizes that the greatest lesson her martial arts master taught her is her necessary obligations to the present world and its past:

> This is what he had prepared her for--to inherit his own entanglement in the world, and now, with this perhaps demented Karmology hustle of Takeshi's, with the past as well, and the crimes behind the world, the thousand bloody arroyos in the hinterlands of time that stretched somberly inland from the honky-tonk coast of Now. (180)

Unresolved past traumas continue into the present, and DL understands, however reluctantly, that they demand justice. This vision of justice, which takes the form of karmic adjustment, is in distinct contrast to the punitive nature of Reaganism's division of History into winners and losers. It is not a history without consequences in which betrayal is routine, but a history with obligations.[39]

The recovery of history in Vineland also means the retrieval of utopian possibilities that were lost in past traumas. Such possibilities are the People's Republic of Rock and Roll

---

[39] Takeshi wants to base a world currency system on "giri chits," which DL describes as "sorta karmic IOUs" (100). Giri translates into English as "obligation" or "duty," but it also has strong connotations of "justice."

and the radical film collective 24fps--two utopian moments that were betrayed in the 1960s and disavowed in the 1980s. Historical moments like these are destabilizing, for they challenge the dominant ideology by showing, if only briefly, what that ideology defines as "impossible." And what, moreover, it tries to disavow. Pynchon provides one example of this process with Southern California's College of the Surf, which is literally dominated by Nixon, whose one-hundred foot monument gazes on the campus. Before it becomes PR^3, this disciplinary institution is both an embodiment of official values and a training ground for their reproduction:

> Ostensibly College of the Surf was to have been their own private polytechnic for training the sorts of people who would work for them, offering courses in law enforcement, business administration, the brand-new field of Computer Science, admitting only students likely to be docile, enforcing a haircut and dress code that Nixon himself confessed to finding a little stodgy. It was the last place anybody expected to see any dissent from official reality, but suddenly here with no prelude it had begun, the same dread disease infecting campuses across the land, too many cases even in the first days for campus security to deal with. (204-05)

PR^3's spontaneous dissolution of "official reality" is a moment of ideological rupture, revealing that other, alternative realities are possible. Something similar occurs in the otherworldly

photograph of DL and Frenesi that, unwatched, comes to life. It is utopian in two ways. First, it represents an ideal social relation based on trust, tolerance, mutuality, and an almost psychic form of communication. Second, as an example of the uncanny, in which something familiar but long forgotten returns to disturb the present, it represents another moment of ideological rupture.[40] The animated photograph is a fantasy, to be sure; but, as Žižek reminds us, the "only way to break the power of our ideological dream," what Pynchon terms "official reality," "is to confront the Real of our desire which announces itself in . . . dream" (48). The fantasy life of the photograph represents the utopian desires that Reaganism's ideological fantasy of an intact wholeness assures have already been met. Vineland's pragmatic paranoia and revised nostalgia puncture the simulational reality of amnesiac politics by recovering not just the past but also its forgotten utopian moments.

Reconciliation, Happy Endings, and the Desire for the Millennial End

Ronald Reagan liked to end his speeches and addresses on an up-beat note; more particularly, he liked to tell stories, whether real or unreal, that invariably concluded with a

---

[40] Berger writes: "History, for Pynchon, is the alien, uncanny presence that is also that which is most familiar; it is what has formed and informed the present suddenly encountered as Other, as dead" (173). As the uncanny in Vineland, history generates a pragmatic paranoia.

happy ending. Vineland also tells a story at its ending: Sister Rochelle's parable about Heaven, Hell, and Earth which suggests that redemption does not entail punishment of what is disavowed but reunion with it. This parable is enacted in the family reunion that closes Vineland. In a pastoral setting reconciliation occurs between mother and child, betrayer and betrayed, the living and the dead; in other words, between the past and present, as embodied in the many generations of the Traverse and Becker families. Karmic balance seems to be achieved when Brock Vond is taken to Tsorrek, the land of the dead, and Jess Traverse reads from Emerson:

> Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil. (369)

In Vineland's final sentences Prairie awakens to Sunday morning light and is reunited with her long lost dog, Desmond. Yet there is something not quite right about this "happy ending." It seems Reaganesque in its up-beat emphasis on a girl, her dog, and pastoral sunshine: it's morning in America.

Or is it? Vineland's ambiguous ending can be understood as a representation of the desired but "unreal" millennial end of history on which Reaganism capitalized.[41] There is a cautionary note to the novel's conclusion. Emerson's words annually read by Jess Traverse are from "The Sovereignty of Ethics," an 1878 essay that maintains we are but minor characters in the plot of a divine History. Promoting political quietism in the face of injustice, Emerson writes: "Melioration is the law. . . . in spite of appearances, in spite of malignity and blind self-interest living for the moment, an eternal, beneficent necessity is always bringing things right" (188-89). However, as Jerry Varsava notes, these sentiments are ironic in the context of Jess Traverse's own history of political activism (91-92). That is, while the karmic balance promised at the millennial end of history remains the desired end, Pynchon indicates that it cannot be achieved by the infantilized form of quietism that Reagan's millennialism fostered. A cautionary note is also present when Prairie, before she falls asleep, calls to Brock Vond and fantasizes about him:

---

[41] "Unreal" in that it represents a real cultural fantasy. When I first read Vineland, its final sentences immediately brought to mind The Wizard of Oz, whose ending is the reunion of a just awoken girl, her dog, and her family and friends, as rural sunshine streams through her open bedroom window. Having experienced genuine terrors, as well as moments of bliss, Dorothy is assured by her Aunt Em that it was all just a dream. The lesson she has learned is that "there's no place like home," the magic words that promise Dorothy her desires are already fulfilled and assure her that she need not look elsewhere for happiness and satisfaction. In Žižekian terms, Dorothy encountered the Real of her desire in the dream, but official reality assures her it was "only a dream," and therefore unreal.

> "You can come back," she whispered, waves of cold sweeping over her, trying to gaze steadily into a night that now at any turn could prove unfaceable. "It's OK, rilly. Come on, come in. I don't care. Take me anyplace you want." But suspecting already that he was no longer available, that the midnight summoning would go safely unanswered, even if she couldn't let go. (384, emphasis added)

Apparently Prairie has inherited Frenesi's (and Sasha's) deep attraction to authority. In this disturbing prelude to the millennial end, Pynchon indicates a connection between millennialism and authoritarianism, suggesting that the desire for the end is always vulnerable to ideological manipulation, and especially in the context of a simulational, "unfaceable" power that is everywhere and nowhere. In that situation, Vineland shows, millennial desire can result in infantilization, becoming regressive rather than progressive.

The word "unfaceable" appeared earlier in a description of a dispersed power that eludes conspiracy- thinking. Ronald Reagan is an emblem for that form of power, an emblem that is completed by his vice president, former CIA director George Bush. Michael Rogin argues that President Reagan and Vice-President Bush were well prepared by their prior careers: the one in the movie industry and later television, the other in covert operations. The

two are combined, he maintains, in the spectacle as amnesia that characterizes postmodern American politics.[42] Pynchon's response to this form of politics is the recovery of historical memory. Refusing the closed frame of apocalyptic history, Vineland foregoes conspiracy theory as a means of understanding power and how it operates. But it does not reject paranoia. Rather, it offers a pragmatic paranoia coupled with a revised nostalgia as a means to approach a utopian end in history rather than awaiting its promised but always deferred arrival at history's putative triumphal end.

---

[42] "Covert actions derive from the imperatives of spectacle, not secrecy," Rogin writes. "They owe their invisibility not to secrecy but to political amnesia. What is displayed and forgotten in imperial spectacle is the historical content of American political demonology" ("Make My Day!'" 102).

Chapter Five:

The End of History, the Last Man, and the Miraculous Last Word: Don DeLillo's Underworld

Like Don DeLillo's previous novels, Underworld is skeptical of ideology's claim to structure the world in closed models of cause and effect, origin and end. The logic of "systems," a word that occurs frequently in DeLillo's texts, is examined in many of his novels, and the seductive appeal of total models of history, as well as the question of historical agency, is a central concern of his recent novels.[1] White Noise (1985) examines agency in the context of the interconnected systems of simulated realities created by mass media, electronic communications, and computerized information networks. Libra (1988) presents the allure of total models of history, how they promise existential solace, and pursues the consequences of the fetishization of History, whether as master plot or conspiratorial counterplot. Mao II

---

1 Tom LeClair analyzes DeLillo's novels, from Americana to White Noise, as "systems novels": novels that critically respond to the rigidities and inadequacies of total systems and conceptual models whose aim is to contain experience and synthesize reality (In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel [Urbana and Chicago: U Illinois P, 1987]). I find significance in the archaeology that dominates The Names (1982) and think that that novel marks a turn in DeLillo's writing toward questions of history, as the lost past that haunts the present, and posthistory, as the absent future that also troubles the present, as well as history as another total system that provides a coherent narrative synthesis.

(1991) suggests that the mass desire of undifferentiated crowds is often attracted to systems, whether religious or political, that claim the ownership of history and promise the mastery of its end. In Underworld DeLillo extends this critique of total models of history by indicating that the end of history is the object of both utopian desire and ideological foreclosure. He does so through an emphasis on contradiction as a means to resist the dominant ideology's millennial end. Yet Underworld does not simply privilege contradiction as a valued principle of dissonance. DeLillo's novel also insists on the real social and political contradictions that continue at the putative end of history, contradictions that remain to be resolved.

Stressing on its first page that "longing on a large scale is what makes history" (11), Underworld questions whether or not fundamental human desires have been fulfilled by the course of American history. Underworld can be read not merely as a fin-de-millennium text, as many of its reviewers regarded it, but more precisely as an examination of the end-of-history thesis, a thesis made prominent by Jean Baudrillard and others in the 1980s and early 1990s, when DeLillo began writing Underworld, and brought to wide-ranging debate by Francis Fukuyama's 1989 article in The National Interest, "The End of History?" whose book-length elaboration in 1992, The End of History and the Last Man, provoked a second round of debate.[2] In a retrospective sweep from 1992 to 1951, Underworld confronts a

---

[2] It would have been hard for DeLillo to remain unaware of the end-of-history debate. The publication of "The End of History?" in The National Interest coincided with the events of 1989 in eastern Europe that forced the opening of the Berlin Wall. Not only did the contents of Fukuyama's article cause a stir among academics and bureaucrats in many countries, its

proposition central to various descriptions of posthistory and one that is expressed in both the cynical triumphalism of Fukuyama's The End of History and the often glib pessimism of Baudrillard's own fin-de-millennium retrospective, The Illusion of the End: the notion that nothing new can now be imagined, no innovation in ideas or ideals is now possible.

DeLillo's novel explores the condition of posthistory, a condition described by Gianni Vattimo (after Arnold Gehlen) as one in which progress has lost its forward movement and has instead "become routine."[3] In its portrayal of a society that seemingly produces nothing

---

timing also seemed prescient, giving it even wider publicity in the American media. According to Tom Darby, it "was read, chattered about, criticized, and applauded by academics, pundits, and those who walk the corridors of power. Then Fukuyama's picture even appeared on the cover of the New York Times Magazine" ("Technology, Christianity, and the Universal Homogeneous State," in After History?, ed. Timothy Burns [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994], 197). New York City, moreover, was the site in 1985 of "The End of the World" conference that featured Baudrillard, whose La gauche divine (1985), Cool Memories (1987), "The Year 2000 Has Already Happened" (1987), The Transparency of Evil (1993), and The Illusion of the End (1994) reveal his increasing interest in theorizing the end of history (Douglas Kellner, Jean Baudrillard [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989], 208-217). Baudrillard's analyses of the postmodern condition, especially his theory of the simulacrum, have already been much used to discuss previous novels by DeLillo, notably White Noise. While this feature of his prognostications has received the most attention in readings of DeLillo's novels, Baudrillard's related notion of an exhausted history also needs to be emphasized.

[3] We are at a stage, argues Vattimo, when even technology no longer advances history: the "human capability to order nature through technology has increased and will continue to increase to such a point that, even while ever-newer achievements have become possible, the increased capability to order and arrange simultaneously makes them ever less 'new.' In a consumer society continual renewal (of clothes, tools, buildings) is already physiologically for the system simply to survive. What is new is not in the least 'revolutionary' or subversive; it is what allows things to stay the same" (The End of Modernity, trans. Jon R. Snyder [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988], 7). See also Arnold Gehlen, Man in the Age of

but weapons and waste, Underworld considers the possibility of future change. Contemporary society, DeLillo suggests, has entered a hiatus of history, a disturbing zone of dead-endedness that is no longer capable of creating meaningful change but is instead creating monotonous agitation as it moves toward a globalized homogenization. Emphasizing that recycling is the only significant action available to its characters, Underworld suggests that America at the end of the twentieth century might very well have arrived at a moment of irreversibility, but not necessarily one of inevitability, an important distinction made by Gregory Bruce Smith in his discussion of the end-of-history thesis (7). However, DeLillo's examination of posthistorical paralysis, as well as the "last man" Nietzsche described as emerging at history's terminus, challenges the assumption that America has indeed arrived at the end of history when Underworld locates future possibility in the "vernacular" language of Klara Sax's art and Moonman's graffiti.

A much anticipated "big" novel, Underworld is also an ambiguous one. This ambiguity is most prominent in its remarkable ending when the transfigured face of Esmeralda, brutally raped and murdered, appears on a billboard advertising orange juice, and Sister Edgar, the Cold-War nun of the South Bronx, achieves another sort of miraculous

---

Technology, trans. Patricia Lipscomb (New York: Columbia UP, 1980).

transfiguration in the World Wide Web.[4] DeLillo's recourse to the supernatural and the cybernetic unnatural is strategic, however; it represents an attempt to reconcile the fundamental contradictions of continuing social and political injustice. One way to account for the ambiguity of Underworld is to stress that the end of history is itself not only an ambiguous event, as Jean-Philippe Mathy observes (272), but that the end of history in an American context is an especially ambivalent event because it evokes the millennialism promoted by the dominant ideology. Yet, even as it rejects the notion of an end, Underworld's own end nonetheless offers an extravagant reconciliation of contradiction and conflict--a reconciliation, in other words, that gestures toward the utopian promise of universal justice to be fulfilled at the end of history.

---

[4] Many reviewers remarked on DeLillo's swerve to the miraculous. Some approved, like Tom LeClair: "DeLillo gives his most profound subject--apocalypse--his most subtle treatment" and "awards readers a peace dividend--millennial hope" ("An Underhistory of Mid-Century America," Atlantic Monthly October 1997: 114). Others, however, regarded the novel's conclusion as a regressive retreat into the certainties of religion. John Leonard, for instance, scoffed that the "poster boy of postmodernism is a secret Holy Roller" ("American Jitters," Nation 3 November 1997: 18). Even Tony Tanner, an English critic sensitive to the aims and methods of the American postmodern novel, is exasperated with Underworld, finding in its vocabulary of mystery and miracles a sentimental deliquescence from the edgy satire of DeLillo's previous novels ("Afterthoughts on Don DeLillo's Underworld," Raritan 17 [Spring 1998]: 48-71).

The Terminus of History

Underworld's opening observation that "longing on a large scale is what makes history" introduces the Hegelian understanding of history as a coherent and unitary progress of human consciousness. That is, history has a rational purpose: humanity has a goal and it is freedom. Extending back to Hegel, who maintained in The Philosophy of History that America is "the land of the future, where . . . the burden of the World's History shall reveal itself" (86), is a crucial assumption widely shared among various end-of-history formulations that America is the most elaborated product of Western modernization and rationalization.[5] Central to the arguments of both Fukuyama and Baudrillard is this assumption of America's representative status as the terminus of history. Both Baudrillard and Fukuyama maintain that America has arrived at the end, but their interpretations of that arrival arise from different perspectives. Fukuyama regards it as a completion of historical processes whereas Baudrillard reads it as their exhaustion.

Superficially, Fukuyama's argument seems to be optimistic and Baudrillard's pessimistic; however, both share a deep cynicism about the possibility of significant change that Underworld works against. Expressing what Mathy describes as a "disenchanted

---

[5] Jean-Philippe Mathy notes that this core assumption characterizes both the anti-American and pro-American polemics produced by French intellectuals on the left and right (267-70). That it is common to most European interpretations of posthistory is evident in Lutz Niethammer's Posthistoire.

Hegelianism," Baudrillard writes in a French tradition that, beginning with Alexis de Tocqueville, looks to America as the harbinger of future conditions: "We [Europeans] philosophize on the end of lots of things," he writes in America, "but it is here that they actually come to an end" (98). Fukuyama openly relies on the Hegelian model of a universal history to counter what he describes as the "extreme pessimism of our own century" (5). While he is careful not to present the United States as standing alone at the apex of historical development, a certain triumphalism is implicit in his argument. Nowhere is this attitude more evident than in the final paragraphs of The End of History, where Fukuyama envisions future generations as a wagon train pioneering the American west, a metaphor that evokes Frederick Jackson Turner's influential frontier thesis first presented a century ago and whose intellectual legacy was the identification of the pioneer spirit as the American national genius.[6] Arguing that the "pessimistic lessons about history that our century supposedly taught us need to be rethought from the beginning," Fukuyama offers his proposal of a Universal History as a clarification of a twofold crisis in modern political philosophy (12):

> The pessimism of the present with regard to the possibility of progress in history was born out of two separate but parallel crises: the crisis of

---

[6] Fukuyama's metaphor indicates a good deal of strategic historical amnesia (about native dispossession, for example) and a suspicious reader might wonder if it functions as an apology for American economic and military expansion overseas. For a discussion of Fukuyama's argument as a vindication, in intellectual form, of Reaganism's view of history, see Berger (152-53). See also Frank Füredi's discussion of The End of History as providing a justification for a renewed imperialism (39-43).

> twentieth-century politics, and the intellectual crisis of Western rationalism. The former killed tens of millions of people and forced hundreds of millions to live under new and more brutal forms of slavery; the latter left liberal democracy without the intellectual resources with which to defend itself. (11)

The first crisis he assumes has already been answered by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet empire; the second he believes can be met by his argument that liberal democracy, together with advanced capitalism, represents the end (in both meanings of the word) of history, the terminus of a meaningful order of unitary human events. The End of History maintains that liberal capitalist society does indeed fulfill human desires, thus bringing to a close the Enlightenment project of the progressive transformation of the world when all the old contradictions, tensions, and conflicts--the dialectic of History--finally achieve resolution. Fukuyama concedes that history--with a lower-case h--will continue. That is, conflicts will necessarily arise, especially in the Third World where, such is the cynical upshot of his thesis, those nations will inevitably have to work out their own contradictions in order to "catch up" with the West. The Third World, moreover, will also likely be the site of Western military intervention should it refuse to follow the correct path of History.[7] The

---

[7] "For the foreseeable future," Fukuyama writes, "the world will be divided between a post-historical part, and a part that is still stuck in history" (276). Anticipating future conflict between these two parts, he suggests that the latter one might have to be un-stuck by military force: "The historical half of the world persists in operating according to realist principles [i.e., power-politics], and the post-historical half must make use of realist methods when dealing with the part still in history. The relationship between democracies and non-democracies will

crucial point of Fukuyama's argument is that because there appears to be no imaginable alternative to liberal democracy in its present form humanity has therefore arrived at the end of history: "if we are now at a point where we cannot imagine a world substantially different from our own, in which there is no apparent or obvious way in which the future will represent a fundamental improvement over our current order, then we must take into consideration the possibility that History itself might be at an end" (51).

Making a virtue of posthistorical paralysis, The End of History can be read as a manifesto for a politics of what Sloterdijk terms "cynical reason." In his opening statements, Fukuyama summarizes the central premise of his earlier article in which he posited that "the ideal of liberal democracy could not be improved on" (xi, Fukuyama's emphasis). Yet the cynicism of his argument repudiates ideals.[8] If there is one, it is the ideal of the comfortable

---

still be characterized by mutual distrust and fear, and despite a growing degree of economic interdependence, force will continue to be the ultima ratio in their mutual relations" (279).

[8] This is a point Sloterdijk repeatedly returns to throughout Critique of Cynical Reason. "Only in the form of derision and renunciation do references to the ideals of a humane culture still seem bearable," he writes. "Cynicism, as enlightened false consciousness, has become a hard-boiled, shadowy cleverness that has split courage off from itself, holds anything positive to be fraud, and is intent only on somehow getting through life" (546).

Christopher Bertram observes that the principles of freedom and equality, which Fukuyama maintains are only obtained in a capitalist liberal democracy, are not as absolute in The End of History as they initially appear to be: "Fukuyama first presents the end of history as the realization or completion of an ideal: a state of affairs where free and equal persons accord one another recognition as such. When the implications of this appear more radical than he considers feasible or desirable history is allowed to terminate, uncompleted. Yet this terminated end is still presented as a completion" ("The End of History: One More

survival of the privileged; its only virtues are resignation and duration (supported by the will to self-preservation, which, if threatened, may resort to violence). Praise for the failure of historical imagination encourages low expectations, as Frank Fűredi notes, and also discourages historical thinking, which regards history as the product of human actions (42-43). The End of History forecloses the future by maintaining that the present is as good as it gets. Alternatives to the present status quo--whether local or global--are declared unthinkable and therefore impossible. In its examination of posthistorical paralysis, Underworld struggles with precisely this lack of an alternative vision that would articulate historical imagination about thinking the end otherwise.

The Abjection of History

Underworld maintains that the Cold War marked a perversion of a coherent process of history when the future threatened catastrophe--nuclear war--and thereby generated a "secret history," an "underhistory." As Klara Sax puts it, "didn't life take an unreal turn at some point?" (73). Underworld locates that point of departure at various moments. Beginning with the wartime work "on the thing with no name, the bomb that would redefine

---

Push!" in Has History Ended?, ed. Chistopher Bertram and Andrew Chitty [Aldershot: Avebury, 1994]: 176).

the limits of human perception and dread" (422), weapons of mass destruction threaten a literal end and the future is regarded with apocalyptic dread. During the week of the Cuban Missile Crisis, after listening to Lenny Bruce repeatedly scream "We're all gonna die!" his spooked audience aimlessly drive the California highways, going nowhere "to rehearse the end of history, or actually see it":

> And so they drove half the night, at first morose and then angry and then fatalistic and then plain shaking scared, chests tight with the knowledge of how little it would take to make the thing happen--the first night on earth when the Unthinkable crept up over the horizon line and waited in an animal squat, and all the time they drove they heard the keening of that undisguisable Jewish voice repeating the line that made them bust their guts laughing, astonishingly, only a few hours earlier. (508-09)

Louis T. Bakey, on a bombing mission during the Vietnam War, recalls one B-52 flight over the Nevada Test Site when, during the flash, the entire crew resembled Pieter Bruegel's The Triumph of Death, a painting that works as a leitmotif throughout the novel: "I thought I was flying through Judgment Day . . . And I kept seeing the flying dead through closed eyes, skeleton men" (613). As emphasized by Underworld's prologue, "The Triumph of Death," the arms race marks America's departure from a putative past safety and security into something threatening and sinister. At the 1951 New York Giants's playoff victory over the Brooklyn Dodgers, Russ Hodges watches the jubilant crowd and "thinks this is another kind

of history. He thinks they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with a protective power. . . . It is all falling indelibly into the past" (59-60). For Hodges, as for DeLillo, the game represents the last "example of some unrepeatable social phenomenon," as DeLillo notes in his essay, "The Power of History" (2). "I felt this game to be one of the last celebrated events all Americans share in their memory," he told an interviewer. "Later, catastrophes came to dominate the public mind" (Burger 1).

Linked to this "Shot Heard Round the World," as the New York Times called it, is another blast. While watching the baseball game, J. Edgar Hoover is informed that the Soviet Union has successfully conducted an atomic test, thus threatening America's confident self-image as "a country that's in a hurry to make the future" (39). Examining Bruegel's Triumph of Death, reproduced in the pages of Life, Hoover recognizes that the arms race inaugurates a new and "secret history" (50), one comprising many plots that deflect the master plot of History:

> There is the secret of the bomb and there are the secrets that the bomb inspires, things even the Director cannot guess--a man whose own sequestered heart holds every festering secret in the Western world--because these plots are only now evolving. This is what he knows, that the genius of the bomb is printed not only in its physics of particles and rays but in the occasion it creates for new secrets. For every atomic blast . . . he reckons a hundred plots go underground, to spawn and skein. (51)

Himself a master of plots, Hoover represents a new form of government power that is consolidated by the Cold War arms build-up. For now the "state controlled the means of apocalypse" (563), a power that is paralleled in Hoover's system of massive dossiers in which "the file was everything, the life nothing" (559). The sense of dread and powerlessness encouraged by the threat of annihilation--what DeLillo elsewhere describes as "the textured paranoia that replaces history and marks an epoch's direst and deadest end" ("Power of History" 62)--is reinforced and taken advantage of by a governmental surveillance system whose power is located in "the endless estuarial mingling of paranoia and control" (559). Assuming ancient metaphors of absolute power, the government generates a "system predicated on death from the sky" (458). Matty Shay, who is catechized by Sister Edgar, Hoover's Cold-War twin, in duck-and-cover drills, huddles with his classmates during one such drill in a position of "abject entreaty, the adoration of the cloud of all-power" (728).

With weapons comes their "mystical twin" waste, the other image that dominates Underworld: "two streams of history, weapons and waste" (791). The protagonist Nick Shay makes a successful living in the expanding industry of waste-disposal and recycling: "waste handlers, waste traders, cosmologists of waste" (88). As the land of plenty, America is also the land of trash. One immigrant marvels that the "goddamn country has garbage you can eat, garbage that's better to eat than the food on the table in other countries. They have garbage here you can furnish your house and feed your kids" (766-67). Underworld, however, suggests that waste is not merely the disposable detritus of history, the abject by-product of

progress, but also represents a past that can never be superseded and thus rendered obsolete by technological advances. Civilization does not produce waste, argues the "waste theorist" Jesse Detwiler; waste produces civilization: "we have everything backwards" (285, 287). Nick visits a waste treatment plant in Holland and surveys "a scene that is medieval-modern, a city of high-rise garbage, the hell reek of every perishable object ever thrown together, and it seems like something we've been carrying all our lives" (104). In a parallel scene, Brian Glassic, Nick's colleague at Waste Containment, observes of the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island that "it was science fiction and prehistory" (184). The rampant consumerism of a technologically advanced society has not satisfied human desire nor met the deepest longings: "The landfill showed him smack-on how the waste stream ended, where all the appetites and hankerings, the sodden second thoughts came runneling out, the things you wanted ardently and then did not" (184-85). Because desire, the fuel of history in the Hegelian scheme, remains unanswered, the present has not progressed "beyond" the past. Hence the repeated observation that the streets of New York City have "a late medieval texture," something reminiscent of Bruegel's painting (391). As Nick comes to conclude: "waste is the secret history, the underhistory" (791).

Underworld presents waste as not merely the result of consumer excess. That is, waste represents not just the result of overproduction in the chain of supply and demand, but also comes to mark a hiatus in the linear movement of progress. If the advance of history has indeed been interrupted, as the novel suggests, then novelty becomes impossible. Nothing

new is produced, only waste: "an interesting word that you can trace through Old English and Old Norse back to the Latin, finding such derivatives as empty, void, vanish and devastate" (120). Emphasis is therefore placed on recycling. Living comfortably in Phoenix, Nick is pleased to live in a city that has carefully "contained" the past, like so much waste, amidst a desert landscape, another waste, seemingly empty of history: "And I liked the way history did not run loose here. They segregated visible history. They caged it, funded and bronzed it, they enshrined it carefully in museums and plazas and memorial parks. The rest was geography, all space and light and shadow and unspeakable hanging heat" (86). The Shay household makes a domestic ritual of its garbage disposal; or at least it is a ritual in Nick's mind. Like Jack Gladney, who seeks spiritual comfort in reciting the brand names of consumer goods and services throughout White Noise, Nick Shay seems to find solace in repeating, in obsessive detail and with minor variations, the weekly routine of the careful sorting of trash:

> At home we removed the wax paper from cereal boxes. We had a recycling closet with separate bins for newspapers, cans and jars. We rinsed out the used cans and empty bottles and put them in their proper bins. We did tin versus aluminum. On pickup days we placed each form of trash in its separate receptacle and put the receptacles, from the Latin verb that means receive again, out on the sidewalk in front of the house. We used a paper bag for the paper bags. We took a large paper bag and put all the smaller bags inside and

> then placed the large bag alongside all the other receptacles on the sidewalk. We ripped the wax paper from our boxes of shredded wheat. There is no language I might formulate that could overstate the diligence we brought to these tasks. We did the yard waste. We bundled the newspapers but did not tie them in twine. (102-03)

Recycling today, recycling tomorrow, the Shay household lives in a recycled present, placing the past and the future in their proper receptacles. Even products are bought not on the basis of their future use-value but on the basis of their future disposal: "We didn't say, What kind of casserole will that make? We said, What kind of garbage will that make?" (121). A man who congratulates himself for "liv[ing] responsibly in the real," for "not stand[ing] helpless before" history (82), Nick believes he has consigned history to the dustbin. But, as his son's bumper sticker reads, he is "Going Nowhere Fast" (89), experiencing what Baudrillard terms the unique experience of the late twentieth century: "accelerated inertia" (Illusion 4).

The Absence of History, Melancholy Memory, and the Fetish of Waste

Recycling is not confined to waste; the past is also recycled to yield a sense of historicity. Underworld suggests that if history has entered a hiatus, then the future is no longer a site of expectation. Instead, the past becomes the locus of desire. Marvin Lundy,

a dealer in baseball memorabilia who understands "the deep eros of memory" (171), remarks that "people collect, collect, always collecting" (174). When Brian Glassic meets Marian Shay in Prescott, an encounter that begins their affair, he has come to see an exhibit of vintage cars while she is there on business for a design firm that renovates old buildings. "You look at old cars," Marvin later tells Brian, "and recall a purpose, a destination" (170). It is precisely that destination, the future telos of historical purpose, that various characters in Underworld feel they have lost. Marvin takes Eleanor Lundy to a district in San Francisco called the Float, a street of specialty shops dealing in esoteric objects of nostalgia and fetishism, "floating zones of desire" (319), where one establishment sells old copies of National Geographic to furtive men in raincoats:

> Marvin did not think these men were interested in photos of wolf packs on the tundra at sunset. It was something else they sought, a forgotten human murmur, maybe, a sense of families in little heartland houses with a spaniel flop-eared on the rug, a sense of snug innocence and the undiscovered world outside, the vast geographic. A pornography of nostalgia, maybe, or was it something else completely? (320)

Another shop-owner explains that although the items are themselves rubbish, "old paper, that's all it is," his customers want to purchase, and thus experience, "a history they feel they're part of" (322). Fetishized objects of memorabilia compensate for loss, as Marvin comes to realize after Eleanor's death: "All that frantic passion for a baseball and he finally understood it was

Eleanor on his mind, it was some terror working deep beneath the skin that made him gather up things, amass possessions and effects against the dark shape of some unshoulderable loss. Memorabilia" (191-92). Nick follows a similar logic when, against the loss of his father, he buys the baseball said to be the one used in the 1951 game.

This sense of loss, moreover, is not simply an expression of personal bereavement suffered in the private lives of some of Underworld's central characters (as Frank Lentricchia asserts, all of DeLillo's novels refuse "the opposition of the personal and the public" [4]). It is representative of an unprecedented general condition. If, as Baudrillard argues, history is everywhere at the end of the twentieth century when everything of the past is recorded and filed in artificial memory to be endlessly recycled, the signs of history are in everything (Illusion 9). But such attempts to rescue history only accelerate the inertia of the contemporary historical hiatus when the present is little more than a mediascape: history is preserved in "disenchanted simulacra," in Douglas Kellner's words, that offer only an "impoverished compensation for what can never be repeated" (313, 315). Because historical time becomes residual in a simulational culture, the instantaneity of news is therefore valued for its constructed "nowness." Thus Richard Henry Gilkey, the Texas Highway Killer, finds his medium in television, a medium that in Underworld presents events whose only significance is their broadcast. Like Lyle Wynant in Players and Lee Harvey Oswald in Libra, he seeks a sense of historicity through violent means, wanting not glory, the now vanished aura of the historic event, but identity: an entry into History. The Texas Highway Killer

"wastes" people "to become part of the history of others," "liv[ing] in their histories, in the photographs in the newspapers" (266, 271). Speaking on-air--"live"--to a television anchorwoman, he is "made [to] feel real" (269). The videotape of one of his murders is endlessly aired on television, not as much infinitely reproduced as it is infinitely recycled.

As concrete evidence of a historical identity, of an actual past, waste itself can become an object of powerful desire. The "garbage archaeologist" Detwiler connects waste to nostalgia (281). Believing that waste disposal sites are the "scenery of the future" and "eventually the only scenery left," he envisions Disneyworlds of toxic waste, tourist attractions of "remote landscape[s] of nostalgia. Bus tours and postcards" (286). "Don't underestimate our capacity for complex longings," he tells Nick and Big Sims. "Nostalgia for the banned materials of civilization, for the brute force of old industries and conflicts" (286). Thus European tourists, Old World descendants of an exhausted history and presumably no longer drawn by ecotourism's promise of an unmediated experience of raw nature in a pristine New World, visit the wasteland of the South Bronx to experience an elemental shiver of danger in a landscape where the "brute force" of history continues. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, they come to an area known as the Wall, a place of "car bodies and discarded human limbs and acres of uncollected garbage" that offers an archaeological glimpse of modern urban history (248): "a landscape of vacant lots filled with years of stratified deposits--the age of house garbage, the age of construction debris and vandalized car bodies, the age of moldering mobster parts" (238). Grace Fahey understands the attraction: "You travel somewhere not

for museums and sunsets but for ruins, bombed-out terrain, for the moss-grown memory of torture and war" (248). A posthistorical age, according to Baudrillard, "no longer produces ruins or relics," the wonders of past historical glory once visited by tourists, but "only wastes and residues" (Illusion 79).

Furthermore, if only waste can be produced, then it, too, soon becomes a valuable commodity. Underworld's epilogue, "Das Kapital," emphasizes that waste becomes yet one more commodity in a post-industrial, late capitalist society. Garbage is traded in the commodity pits in Chicago, "synthetic feces" are manufactured in Dallas, and human testicles are recycled for "rejuvenating beauty cream" in Russia (804). Recycling acquires an aura of the marvelous just as earlier in the century the assembly lines of American heavy industry were conventionally presented as a wonder of technological progress:

> The tin, the paper, the plastics, the styrofoam. It all flies down the conveyer belts, four hundred tons a day, assembly lines of garbage, sorted, compressed and baled, transformed in the end to square-edged units, products again, wire-bound and smartly stacked and ready to be marketed. . . . Brightness streams from skylights down to the floor of the shed, falling on the tall machines with a numinous glow. Maybe we feel a reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard. (809)

Earlier generations of schoolchildren made field-trips to factories and processing plants to witness American industrial power; now Nick's granddaughter comes to this "waste facility" on school excursions to "stand on the catwalk and visit the exhibits" (809). The "best-kept secret in the world," as Detwiler tells a conference of waste-handling firms, waste is a hot commodity in a global economy (281). As if in ironic confirmation of a famous remark made by Alexandre Kojève, Hegel's most influential twentieth-century interpreter, that "if the Americans give the appearance of rich Sino-Soviets, it is because the Russians and the Chinese are only Americans who are still poor" (436), DeLillo presents Tchaika, a Russian trading company named after the garbage-picking seagull, that "merchandises" nuclear explosions to any corporation or government wanting to dispose of toxic waste (800).[9] Connected to "the commonwealth arms complex, to bomb-design laboratories and the shipping industry," Tchaika wants Waste Containment to be its supplier (788). Significantly,

---

[9] Much of The End of History relies on Kojève's important commentary on Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit, which applies both Marx and Heidegger to Hegel (although Fukuyama strips Kojève's explication of its Marxist features). Kojève produced an anthropologized version of Hegel that emphasizes desire and satisfaction rather than reason and liberty as the definitive elements of the historical process. He regarded America as a posthistorical society, writing in 1948 that "from a certain point of view, the United States has already attained the final stage of Marxist 'communism,' seeing that, practically, all the members of a 'classless society' can from now on appropriate for themselves everything that seems good to them, without thereby working any more than their heart dictates" (Introduction to the Reading of Hegel [New York: Basic Books, 1969], 160). In his reading, however, the end of history is an ambiguous event; with the "becoming" of history over, life returns to the duration of time experienced by animals (notably bees, in Kojève's formulation), leading Kojève to propose in place of pure animality a life invested in the ceremony of pure style. See Anderson (313-24), Niethammer (63-69), and Mathy (270-73).

its executive Viktor Maltsev was formerly a history teacher, a subject that is presumably now dead.

The Last Man of History

Viktor Maltsev, whose given name must be ironic, is a man who no longer "buys into" history. His desires, however, are entirely "historical," animated by a desire to "catch up" to the consumer paradise of America, as his lengthy dialogue with Nick Shay about weapons and waste reveals. Nick observes that Viktor "belongs to these wild privatized times, to the marathon of danced-out plots. The get-rich-quick plot. The plot of members-only and crush-the-weak. . . . The extortion-and-murder plot" (802). Against Viktor's desire is the seeming absence of Nick's. By the 1990s of Underworld's epilogue, he is the embodiment of the American Dream, feeling "a quiet kind of power because I've done it and come out okay, done it and won, gone in weak and come out strong" (803):

> At Waste Containment I've become a sort of executive emeritus. I go to the office now and then but mostly travel and speak. I visit colleges and research facilities, where I'm introduced as a waste analyst. I talk to them about the vacated military bases being converted to landfill use, about the bunker system under a mountain in Nevada that will or will not accommodate thousands of

steel canisters of radioactive waste for ten thousand years. Then we eat lunch. (804)

Nick has arrived at the end of the rags-to-riches plot along which Viktor hopes to advance. But his material success at the end of the conventional story feels hollow to him, suggesting that his arrival at the traditional terminus is not a triumphant one.

Nick Shay can be understood as representative of the "last man" who, having satisfied his desires, emerges at the end of history. In the final section of The End of History, Fukuyama considers Nietzsche's critique of Hegel's philosophy of history. Nietzsche's Zarathustra finds contemptible "the most despicable man . . . the last man," who is the ultimate product of historical reconciliation and completion:

> The earth hath then become small, and on it there hoppeth the last man who maketh everything small. His species is ineradicable like that of the ground-flea; the last man liveth longest.
>
> "We have discovered happiness"--say the last men, and blink thereby. . . . They have their little pleasures for the day, and their little pleasures for the night; but they have a regard for health.
>
> "We have discovered happiness,"-- say the last men, and blink thereby.-- (12-13)

Safe in his world of physical security and material plenty, history's last man, in Fukuyama's analogy, is like a dog who "is content to sleep in the sun all day provided he is fed, because

he is not dissatisfied with what he is. He does not worry that other dogs are doing better than him, or that his career as a dog has stagnated, or that dogs are being oppressed in a distant part of the world" (311). Seemingly wanting nothing, Nick's energies are directed toward careful attention to the maintenance of his body and an equally fastidious attention to the details of his environment: he regularly jogs to Sufi chants on the Walkman and rearranges the books on the household shelves--two actions repeated compulsively. But the more Nick performs these activities in the absence of desire, the more he senses an inarticulate longing.

> I rearrange books on the old shelves and match and mix for the new shelves and then I stand there looking. I stand in the living room and look. Or I walk through the house and look at the things we own and feel the odd mortality that clings to every object. The finer and rarer the object, the more lonely it makes me feel, and I don't know how to account for this. (804)

Everything that Nick can materially want is before his eyes, openly available to his consuming gaze, yet his <u>longing</u>--a word that emphasizes not only physical distance but also chronological remoteness--remains unsatisfied. "Most of our longings go unfulfilled," he realizes. "This is the word's wistful implication--a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach" (803).

The melancholy voiced by Nick is augmented by the novel's retrospective structure. Describing the political consequences of an end of history, whether in the form of completion or exhaustion, Smith notes that "our only alternative--other than to continue to globally

actualize the reigning ideal--is to engage in sorties through past ideas and forms in acts of remembrance" (8). Underworld presents the first alternative in the globalizing economy of "Das Kapital" in which "the convergence of consumer desire" results in global homogeneity: "Capital burns off the nuance in a culture. . . . Some things fade and wane, states disintegrate, assembly lines shorten their runs and interact with lines in other countries. This is what desire seems to demand" (785). The other alternative is present in DeLillo's choice of a retrospective narration. If history has indeed entered a hiatus, no longer progressing toward a meaningful end, then the conventional structure of the novel, a movement from conflict to resolution or from ambiguity to clarity, will be an inadequate expression of contemporary conditions. Gerald Howard notes that Underworld offers a "reverse trajectory," working backward from contemporary post-Cold War ambiguity to "the intimate clarity of life in a Bronx neighborhood in the fifties" (14), thereby forestalling any sense of an "ever after" or a continuity beyond the end of Nick's story. That backward movement also forestalls any confidence in character development: as a last man of history, Nick Shay has no future. Instead, he can only mourn "the long ghosts [that] are walking the halls" (804) and yearn for "the days of disarray" (806):

> I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang

> and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself. (810)

Experiencing chronological duration rather than historical becoming, Nick longs for desire: desire as a destabilizer, as a potent source of change, and desire, therefore, as a promise of a future.

Uncertain of endings, Underworld emphasizes beginnings. Its retrospective structure locates the originary moments of past losses, failures, and crimes as when, for example, Underworld traces the stories of the various owners of the famous baseball that signifies not victory but defeat. Eleanor Lundy recognizes that Marvin's search for its previous owners is important to him because it provides a narrative's reassuring sense of not only an ending but also a beginning: "A little bedtime thing. You need to finish the story. Dear Marvin. Without the final link to the baseball there's no way to be sure how the story ends. What good's a story without an ending? Although I suppose in this case it's not the ending we need but the beginning" (314). The baseball represents to Nick the disappearance of his lost father, the defeat of the Dodgers seeming to confirm in his mind the unacceptable truth that Jimmy Costanza did in fact walk out on his family--the end to the story of his childhood. This past crime is linked to another mysterious one, Nick's shooting of George Manza, an event that may or may not have been accidental manslaughter. The teen-aged Nick's psychiatrist, whose work is to have him create a narrative of his past, maintains that the two events are connected: "You have a history," Dr. Lindblad tells Nick, "that you are responsible to. . . . You're

required to make sense of it. You owe it your complete attention" (512). Nick insists that "it was a gesture without a history," but the logic of Underworld's structure suggests otherwise (509). So, too, does his choice of occupation suggest that Jimmy's abandonment is the traumatic loss in Nick's past that decided his future. By associating his father with Pluto, he connects him to toxic waste: "The word plutonium comes from Pluto, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld. They took him out to the marshes and wasted him" (106). Nick assumes that if he can successfully dispose of waste then he can successfully dispose of his unhappy past.

The Redemption of History

As Klara Sax's art suggests, the recycling of waste can also be redemptive. Like Nick, who at one point sees a parallel between his work and hers, Klara "transform[s] and absorb[s] junk" in another effort at rehabilitating the past (102). Once known as "the Bag Lady" because she "took junk and saved it for art," she says her artworks offer "just a way of looking at something more carefully. And I'm still doing it, only deeper maybe" (393). Her latest project, begun after the end of the Cold War, does precisely that. The desert installation of hundreds of individually painted B-52s insists on the "small and human" elements of history as a means to "unrepeat" the inhuman sequential logic of the Cold War arms build-up (78):

> See, we're painting, hand-painting in some cases, putting our puny hands to great weapons systems, to systems that came out of the factories and assembly halls as near alike as possible, millions of components stamped out, repeated endlessly, and we're trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life, and maybe there's a sort of survival instinct here, a graffiti instinct--to trespass and declares ourselves, show who we are. (77)

The systems Klara mentions are not only those of weapons, but also the closed systems of Cold War History that produced the weapons. Her project, in other words, undertakes what Tom LeClair argues is DeLillo's own project in each of his novels: to challenge the "pretense of power of large, closed systems" (In the Loop 27). And in Underworld the system under scrutiny is the notion of America's triumphal arrival at History's determinate end. Nick feels exhilaration when he flies over the installation, one of the rare times he expresses any strong emotion, seeing in Klara's recycling of the mothballed planes the promise of a future history: "And truly I thought they were great things, painted to remark the end of an age and the beginning of something so different only a vision such as this might suffice to augur it" (126). DeLillo's biblical cadences are telling and emphasize the significance of Nick's epiphany. For just as Underworld refuses the cynicism of an argument like Fukuyama's that insists that change is impossible, thereby solidifying "a case for doing nothing," in Peter Fenves's words (227), it also finally rejects the fin-de-millennium pessimism of other endists such as Baudrillard because that pessimism also reveals a "fundamentally apologetic intent," as Füredi

notes, for "these theories do not merely imply that history has ended, but that so also has the potential for human fulfilment" (36).[10]

History is neither completed nor exhausted, Underworld insists, because novelty is still possible. DeLillo presents eccentric visions that suggest alternatives to contemporary historical paralysis. Parallel to Nick's powerful response to "Long Tall Sally," the B-52 project, is Klara's astonishment at Watts Towers, an "idiosyncrasy" built of "steel rods and broken crockery and pebbles and seashells and soda bottles and wire mesh" (276). A "rambling art that has no category," it cannot be classified by Klara: "She didn't know what this was exactly. It was an amusement park, a temple complex and she didn't know what else. A Delhi bazaar and Italian street feast maybe. A place riddled with epiphanies, that's what it was" (492). Like Moonman's graffiti, "the flickery jumping art of the slums and dumpsters" (441), Watts Towers speaks in a "vernacular" of democratic longing (492). This vernacular might be one crucial articulation of an alternative language whose existence discredits the

---

[10] In many of his musings on the end of history, Baudrillard is fond of quoting Elias Canetti's contention that "as of a certain point, history was no longer real. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality; everything happening since then was supposedly not true; but we supposedly didn't notice. Our task would now be to find that point, and as long as we didn't have it, we would be forced to abide in our present destruction." According to Douglas Kellner, this frequent citation undermines Baudrillard's reputation in the United States as a radical thinker because it reveals a latent conservatism only now becoming more obvious in his speculations on the end of history. Baudrillard's end-of-history pronouncements, he argues, share with Canetti a horror of mass society, seeing in it the worst expressions of the "selfish, 'evil' and unchanging features of human beings and society" even if Baudrillard gives this sentiment "his own peculiar metaphysical twists and high-tech glosses" (212).

assumption that everything has already been said. Like DeLillo's previous novels that, according to Paula Bryant, examine the limits and limitations of a dominant language become doxa (16), Underworld is aware of the ways in which official discourses can become coercive. Central to Fukuyama's argument that liberal democracy is now universally recognized, if not yet universally achieved, is the observation that everybody, even the cruelest tyrant, now speaks in "the language of democracy" (45). However, as Fenves explains, this evidence "rests on the supposition that the expression of desire is so univocal, and univocal in such a way, that the lack of a certain language is evidence of an absence of desire" (230). Following this logic, if human longing is unfulfilled then another language with which to express unanswered desires would have by now been spoken; if no alternative language can be heard, then desire has been fulfilled--everything has already been said. But that language of unsatisfied longing does exist, Underworld emphasizes, only it has gone unnoticed because it is expressed not by the powerful but by the powerless like Moonman, whose graffiti "is the art of the backstreets talking" (440). His painted subway cars, like Klara's painted planes, voice a "graffiti instinct" protesting that even such basic human needs as food and shelter, let alone the recognition of individual worth stressed by Fukuyama, remain unmet for the "throwaways" of the South Bronx and elsewhere who would be discarded and forgotten like trash at the triumphal end of history (812). The Berlin Wall may have fallen, but Moonman's Wall, on which are memorialized for future eyes the misspelled names of local children dead from disease, neglect, or violence, still stands.

The cynical understanding of the end of history would explain the appalling conditions of the South Bronx--conditions from "another century in another country" (811)--as merely local examples of historical contradictions already resolved in theory.[11] In the language of Underworld, however, "contradiction" is a privileged term. It initially signifies not an inconsistency to be overcome in an evolutionary process of homogenization but a contrariety to be valued for its ability to suggest alternative ideas. Central to Underworld is Unterwelt, a "lost" film of Sergei Eisenstein introduced almost exactly midway in the novel. Suppressed by the Soviet authorities as "eccentric . . . myth-ridden and politically unsound" because it did

---

[11] Fukuyama explains the conditions of the South Bronx as follows: "Of inequalities due to convention rather than nature or necessity, the hardest to eradicate are those arising from culture. Such is the situation of the so-called black 'underclass' in contemporary America. The obstacles confronting a young black growing up in Detroit or the South Bronx only begin with substandard schools, a problem which could in theory be remedied as a matter of public policy. In a society where status is determined almost entirely by education, such an individual is likely to be crippled even before he or she reaches school age. Lacking a home environment capable of transmitting cultural values needed to take advantage of opportunity, such a youngster will feel the constant pull of the 'street' that offers a life more familiar and glamorous than that of middle-class America. Under these circumstances, achievement of full legal equality for blacks and the opportunities provided by the U.S. economy will not make terribly much difference to his or her life" (291-92). This is an evasive argument and is one example of the ways in which The End of History both acknowledges continuing inequalities and sidesteps the issues they pose. Blaming one "culture" as the cause of its own "cultural inequality" (292), Fukuyama does not question why the substandard schools he mentions are not "remedied as a matter of public policy." As he notes, they could "in theory" be fixed. But presumably that would be a waste of money and effort, for the sentences immediately following the ones quoted here describe another public policy that he presents as a waste: affirmative action and equal opportunity programs. For a discussion of how The End of History's notion of "culture" both repeats the role that race played in Oswald Spengler's Decline of the West (1926) and performs the same function as the East-West division of the Cold War bipolar world, see Füredi (41).

not adhere to the official interpretation of history, Unterwelt is a "subversive venture" (425, 426). The film's experimental methods emphasize "the sense of rhythmic contradiction": "the camera angle is a kind of dialectic. Arguments are raised and made, theories drift across the screen and instantly shatter--there's a lot of opposition and conflict" (429). These oppositions and conflicts are left unresolved, however. Having "no plot," Unterwelt does not end, "it just stop[s] dead" (430, 445). The techniques of DeLillo's Eisenstein emphasize that human longing, "what makes history," cannot be explained and resolved by the notion of a Universal History, whether communist or capitalist (watching the film, Klara Sax feels "she was in some ambiguous filmscape somewhere between the Soviet model and Hollywood's vaulted heaven of love, sex, crime and individual heroism" [431]) because human longings are not finite:

> All Eisenstein wants you to see, in the end, are the contradictions of being. You look at the faces on the screen and you see the mutilated yearning, the inner divisions of people and systems, and how forces will clash and fasten, compelling the swerve from evenness that marks a thing lastingly. (444)

If human nature is not fixed, then neither is history: Unterwelt suggests that history is not a monologic plot along which finite possibilities will finally be played out to their fixed conclusion.

Understood as a model in some ways for Underworld, Unterwelt can help explain DeLillo's introduction of the miraculous at the novel's ending. The final scene of Eisenstein's film focuses on a deformed and victimized human face transfigured in a series of

multiple-exposure shots until it finally "dissolves into landscape." Occurring "outside the action proper," this sequence represents "a distinct and visible wish connecting you directly to the mind of the film" (444-45), revealing what Fredric Jameson would describe as the utopian impulse of the film's political unconscious. Something similar is at work in the final pages of Underworld when, after her death, Sister Edgar achieves an apotheosis in the World Wide Web:

> A click, a hit and Sister joins the other Edgar. A fellow celibate and more or less kindred spirit but her biological opposite, her male half, dead these many years. Has he been waiting for this to happen? The bulldog fed, J. Edgar Hoover, the Law's debased saint, hyperlinked at last to Sister Edgar--a single fluctuating impulse now, a piece of coded information.
>
> Everything is connected in the end.
>
> Sister and Brother. A fantasy in cyberspace and a way of seeing the other side and a settling of differences that have less to do with gender than with difference itself, all argument, all conflict programmed out. (826)

With such a remarkable emphasis on the resolution of difference, argument, and conflict--contradiction, in other words--the ending of Underworld contravenes its earlier emphasis on the value of that same contradiction remaining unresolved. Offering not so much a reconciliation of difference as its erasure--"all conflict programmed out"--it approaches the uniformity of conditions heralded by Fukuyama and Baudrillard as inaugurating the end of

history. The novel's last word is "Peace," a "seraphic word" representing a universal desire whose etymology--"fasten, fit closely, bind together" (827)--offers the revelation of an authentic universal history:

> You can examine the word with a click, tracing its origins, development, earliest known use, its passage between languages, and you can summon the word in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Arabic, in a thousand languages and dialects living and dead, and locate literary citations, and follow the word through the tunneled underworld of its ancestral roots. (826)

Maybe history is finite after all. One way to explain DeLillo's valorization of dissonance, on the one hand, and its beatific absence, on the other, is to regard the last pages of Underworld as the generic place where history meets History. Underworld's apocalyptic gestures at closure offer an example of ideology in process, of the ways in which cultural hegemony operates not by overt repression and coercion, but by a rhetorical persuasion that appeals to utopian longings.[12]

---

[12] See Jameson, Political Unconscious, 286-87. The point is not to castigate DeLillo for writing "ideological fiction," a charge made famous by Jonathan Yardley in his dismissal of Libra and soon followed by George Will, who accused DeLillo of bad citizenship. This volatile vocabulary of treason, shame, and guilt, revealing the measure of the ideological stakes involved, had already been used by Bruce Bawer, when he accused DeLillo of expressing un-American attitudes in White Noise first in New Criterion and later in his Diminishing Fictions (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1988). Frank Lentricchia smartly deflates these charges, arguing that, far from being a bad citizen, DeLillo writes in a long history of American dissent, a tradition that is now canonical because it voices real American values: "The American literary way has from the start been fiercely antinomian, suspicious,

The Contradictions of the End

Sister Edgar's miraculous apotheosis in cyberspace does not merely provide the familiar consolation of redemption. It is a scene of what Rob Wilson, following Leo Marx, terms "technological redemption," a post-pastoral version of the "American sublime" that performs a hegemonic function. Nineteenth-century articulations of the American sublime--vast landscapes of national might and continental expansion--effectively sacralized American force, thereby inspiring communal belief in national power as the vital essence of progress. "As a language of democratic longing," writes Wilson, "the sublime imposed landscapes or technoscapes of national identification and higher force, by means of which puny individuals might identify not so much with the power of the state as with a sublimated spectacle of national empowerment increasingly materialized into a railway train, an electronic dynamo, an airplane, or a bomb" (208). Wilson argues that with a globalizing economy the American sublime is now in the process of being refigured to "represent America as an entity of cyberspace" (209), a process already apparent in the promotion of the World Wide Web as an agent of historical redemption because it is believed to advance a democratic expansion of knowledge. Transforming the awe and dread evoked by the romantic sublime, moreover,

---

even 'paranoid,' and how interesting that key word of contemporary jargon becomes when it characterizes the main take on our culture from Anne Hutchinson and Emerson to Pynchon and DeLillo" ("The American Writer as Bad Citizen," in Introducing Don DeLillo, ed. Frank Lentricchia [Durham and London: Duke UP, 1991], 5-6).

the technological sublime incites a "neo-transcendental" combination of delight and paranoia (211). Something similar occurs in Underworld when Sister Edgar, inhabiting the "H-bomb home page," "stands in the flash and feels the power":

> She sees the spray plume. She sees the fireball climbing, the superheated sphere of burning gas that can blind a person with its beauty, its dripping christblood colors, solar golds and reds. She sees the shock wave and hears the high winds and feels the power of false faith, the faith of paranoia, and then the mushroom cloud spreads around her, the pulverized mass of radioactive debris, eight miles high, ten miles, twenty, with skirted stem and smoking platinum cap. The jewels roll out of her eyes and she sees God. (825-26)

But immediately following this cyber-simulation of apocalypse are the words "No, wait, sorry" (826), as if DeLillo means to hastily qualify the wonder and terror of the technoscape, simultaneously resisting the hegemonic pull of the millennialism inherent in the notion of an end of history yet gesturing toward its utopian telos.

In the Hegelian model of history contradiction is finally overcome at its end. Resisting the cynical foreclosure that inhabits many end-of-history arguments, much of Underworld privileges contradiction, suggesting that it creates the texture of experience and the meaning of history--what Nick Shay, as a last man of history, yearns for. Desire, DeLillo indicates, is endless and cannot be fully or finally satisfied, suggesting that history, too, is therefore

endless. Contradiction, therefore, is also an ethical term in Underworld. DeLillo insists on the real contradictions that not only continue but are accelerating in the widening gap between the privileged and the "throwaways"--contradictions that cannot be absolved by the simple insistence that they have already been resolved in theory. The novel, therefore, does not settle for a mere valorization of contradiction; it also seeks to resolve it. There is thus a utopian element at work in its miraculous resolution. Underworld's closing images of a simulated apocalyptic end, an end that is at once catastrophic and beatific, respond to the dominant ideology's millennial seduction by emphasizing that such fundamental contradictions as hunger, disease, and violence--the conventionally distinguishing features of prehistory--still remain unresolved at the supposed end of history. DeLillo's question about Esmeralda's miracle, "how do things end, finally, things such as this" (823), resonates throughout Underworld as an ethical question asked more generally of history's past, present and future.

Conclusion:

Thinking about the Impossible End

Underworld suggests that we not simply dismiss as preposterous the idea of an end of history. Rather, it obliges us to consider the appeal of history completing itself when universal justice is finally achieved. As an endpoint in time, that end is likely impossible (barring, of course, global annihilation in environmental catastrophe or nuclear war); but does its unlikelihood sanction a cynical shrug of the shoulders when the end of history is considered as a humane goal? Maybe, Underworld reflects, closure is to be both resisted and desired.

This paradoxical position is taken by Jacques Derrida in his response to Fukuyama's The End of History. Not only does inequality exist, he writes in Spectres of Marx, but its proportions have become monstrous and will continue to expand so long as they are maintained by the necessitarian "laws" of the market, foreign debt, and technological, military, and economic expansion. Criticizing Fukuyama (and Lyotard), he writes:

> For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. Instead of singing the

> advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth. (85)

Derrida attacks Fukuyama specifically for limiting democracy by reducing its "emancipatory promise," its "undetermined messianic hope" (64-65). In place of the closed structures of apocalyptic history, Derrida urges "another historicity" animated by the open-ended thinking of the messianic and emancipatory promise: "as promise and not as onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design" (74-75).[1]

Derrida's stress on the messianic might seem utopian in the negative sense, but elsewhere he is more specific when he connects the performativity of the emancipatory promise to an infinite responsibility for ethical action.[2] "If responsibility were not infinite," he

---

[1] By "messianic," Derrida means "a structure of experience rather than religion." He characterizes it as a despairing hope that foregoes the calculation of a program; for, if it already knew the end to come, the result would be "Law without justice" (Spectres of Marx, trans. Peggy Kamuf [New York and London: Routledge, 1994], 168-69).

[2] Derrida emphasizes that the "messianic" is not utopian in the pejorative sense of a fanciful future condition, and neither is the narrative of emancipation illegitimate: "from this point of view [of the messianic dimension of the promise], I do not see how one can pose the question

writes in a response to criticism from Richard Rorty, "you could not have moral and political problems. There are only moral and political problems, and everything that follows from this, from the moment when responsibility is not limitable. . . . It is because we act and we live in infinitude that the responsibility to the other is irreducible." History does not provide means of an alibi. The future, the results of ethical action in the present, cannot be plotted by program or design; it is undecidable, just as justice, the object of the emancipatory promise, is never fully satisfied: "this is why undecidability is not a moment to be traversed and overcome. Conflicts of duty . . . are interminable and even when I take my decision and do something, undecidability is not at an end. I know that I have not done enough and it is in this way that morality continues, that history and politics continue" ("Remarks" 86-87). According to Derrida, absolute justice is irreducible because it cannot be wholly defined or codified. It is, in that sense, "impossible." But this does not mean we should give it up as an unachievable goal. Rather, its impossibility is the very condition of possibility for ethical action in history. That is, ethical action tries to achieve what it believes is justice, but is always subject to the possibility of critique, thereby opening up a "critical space," in the words

---

of ethics if one renounces the motifs of emancipation and the messianic. Emancipation is once again a vast question today and I must say that I have no tolerance for those who--deconstructionist or not--are ironical to the grand discourse of emancipation. This attitude has always distressed and irritated me. I do not want to renounce this discourse. . . . I would not call this attitude utopian. The messianic experience of which I spoke takes place here and now" ("Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," trans. Simon Critchley, in Deconstruction and Pragmatism, ed. Chantal Mouffe [London and New York: Routledge, 1996], 82-83).

of Keith Jenkins, between an ideal justice and empirical "justices" (48). This suggests that we conceive of the end of history as a necessary goal but reject determinist History and the calculated alibis it provides.

The novels under discussion here occupy that critical space and articulate, in different ways, "another historicity" animated by the emancipatory promise of a universal justice. They reveal that the end is an object of utopian desire, a desire that is often addressed by the dominant ideology's narrative of a determinate history. But, resisting ideological foreclosure, they do not reject the notion of an end of history. Rather, they ask the related questions: what constitutes the end? how is it defined? who defines it? and how is it to be achieved? None of these novels offers any sort of blueprint, for each is skeptical of total models of history. Each, however, urges historical thinking--an understanding of history as the product of human action--as a means of approaching the end. Each insists on what Pynchon, for example, suggests is the obligation of history: the infinite responsibility "to fiction" history (as Foucault terms it) and to keep alive utopian desire for the end without acquiescing to the certainties of apocalyptic History.

Fredric Jameson begins his Postmodernism with the observation that "the last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by the sense of the end of this or that" (1). This foreclosure of speculation about the future is for Jameson the cynical expression of the logic of a conservative market climate that seeks to avoid the possibility of significant change.

But regarding postmodern fiction as entirely symptomatic of its commodified culture overlooks its critical project. Hegemonic processes may be omnipresent, but they are not necessarily omnipotent, as Giles Gunn notes (13). The novels under discussion here recognize that the dominant ideology is not a uniform and closed system. Any ideology is a false totality, in the words of Pierre Macherey: "a captive of its own limits . . . Ideology is enclosed, finite, but it mistakenly proclaims itself to be unlimited" (131). Each novel establishes the existence of those limits when and where it resists ideological foreclosure.

Written during Cold War and post-Cold War anxieties about American destiny, each challenges the assumptions of the dominant ideology's version of History's master plot. The metafictional strategies of Philadelphia Fire expose the inequality at the center of the power relations that master narrative seeks to normalize when they reveal how the utopia promised as the conventional telos of American destiny is exclusive rather than inclusive. While Wideman challenges the dominant ideology's claims to be natural and transparent by emphasizing its fictive nature, Doctorow and Coover stress its reliance on the total models of historical plot and counterplot. Both Ragtime and The Public Burning undermine the ideological force of an apocalyptic telos by deflecting its significance as narrative closure. In similar fashion, Cities of the Red Night and Vineland suggest the limits of the dominant ideology by refusing the redemptive promise of apocalyptic disclosure. Burroughs and Pynchon write paranoid texts that examine the problem of power and its resistance in a

simulation society, but they reject its resolution. For resolution, they understand, is a specific aim of ideology.

Aware of the integrative resolution figured by the dominant ideology's millennial telos, none of these novels arrives at simple closure. They are suspicious of endings because closure signals the resolution of contradiction and the effacement of difference. Wideman valorizes difference, while Doctorow reveals how it cannot be accommodated by the master narrative of History, and Coover exposes how difference must always be positioned by the dominant ideology as a threatening counter-ideology. Burroughs shows how the destabilizing potential of difference is dissolved in paranoid reading practices, and Pynchon indicates that it is erased in amnesiac representation. A novel, of course, must sooner or later end, and it is at or near its end that each novel emphasizes both its refusal of the end of history as promoted by the dominant ideology yet stresses the end as the goal of utopian desire. This is most obvious in DeLillo's Underworld, whose ending reveals the attraction of a millennial end to contradiction and an understanding that the end of difference is precisely what the American ideology promotes.

Other American writers continue this engagement with the dominant ideology's master narrative of apocalyptic history. Tony Kushner's Pulitzer prize-winning Angels in America offers, in the words of its subtitle, A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. A two-part presentation of AIDS as apocalypse, its first part, Millennium Approaches (1993) warns: "History is about to crack open" (112). In its second part, Perestroika (1994), the Angel of

Death is revealed as "a cosmic reactionary" when she tells one dying character that in his blood is "written: STASIS! The END" (54-55). Resisting "the end of things" (56), Angels in America protests both the demonization of AIDS victims and the cynical manipulation of apocalyptic rhetoric often used to characterize the disease and foster a sense of resignation to its continued presence. Even after his own end, the now dead Prior Walter stresses the endlessness of desire and the endlessness, therefore, of history: "we can't just stop. . . . We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire for" (132).[3]

Other recent works that examine American history and its millennial telos are Philip Roth's American Pastoral (1997) and Toni Morrison's Paradise (1998). The protagonist of American Pastoral, Seymour "Swede" Levov, is a successful American Jew whose life seems to have captured the American Dream. Blonde, beautiful, and virtuous, this graduate of the class of 1945 is the embodiment of success, like his country after the war. The American pastoral, however, soon slides into its opposite when in the 1960s the nation is confronted with war abroad and race-riots and bombs at home: the orderly Swede watches his comfortable world fall into chaos. While American Pastoral assumes, I think, that history has indeed ended, Paradise does not. Morrison's novel examines the deterioration of utopian

---

[3] It is worth noting that Kushner includes the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg as another victim of apocalyptic history in Millennium Approaches. For a discussion of Angels in America as a critique of apocalyptic history that also retains its utopian impulse, see Lee Quinby, Millennial Seduction (29-42). See also Peter Dickinson's "taxonomy" of representations of AIDS as apocalypse in "'Go-go Dancing on the Brink of the Apocalypse': Representing AIDS," in Postmodern Apocalypse, ed. Richard Dellamora (219-40).

ideals into intolerance, hatred, and violence in its chronicle of an all-black town founded by freemen in 1889 and originally named Haven. A century later, the town has moved and been renamed, but the decline that has always dogged it continues. Rage and frustration finally explode when a group of men murder a small community of women living on the outskirts. Morrison resists conventional closure, however, when she leaves open to interpretation the significance of this apocalyptic end. Various townspeople tell different versions of the event, but none "had decided on the meaning of the ending and, therefore, had not been able to formulate a credible, sermonizable account of it" (297). Although suspicious of endings, in its final sentence Paradise gestures toward the utopian end of history as the collective goal of human effort: "Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise" (318).

The refusal of the end, or at least its apparently endless deferral, also characterizes Thomas Pynchon's Mason & Dixon (1997). Seemingly plotless or, perhaps, offering an excess of plots, the novel resists the teleological nature of narrative. Its aimless structure, however, is significant. Set just before the revolution but narrated in the immediate years of its aftermath, Mason & Dixon presents the famous boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland as an "ill-omen'd line" (692). The domesticated New World becomes a disenchanted one and the surveying of Mason and Dixon marks boundaries, geographic and otherwise, that will later divide and threaten to destroy the nation. The Line is "some great linear summing of Human Incompletion,--fail'd Arrivals, Departures too soon, mis-stated Intentions, truncations of

Desire" (692). In many ways, Mason & Dixon refuses the notion of an end of history, but it also retains the utopian desire implicit in thinking about the end as the goal of human action. History is neither completed nor exhausted, Pynchon suggests, when America can serve "as a very Rubbish-Tip for Subjunctive Hopes, for all that may yet be true" (345).

E.L. Doctorow's City of God (2000) likewise wonders whether history has a meaningful direction toward a finite endpoint, as Augustine's De Civitate Dei maintained. The attraction of such an idea, however, is also its danger. Confronted with the atrocities of the twentieth century, and the crimes committed by those who claim history's ownership, Doctorow's novel worries that history might be a meaningless series of catastrophes. Yet City of God also insists on the emancipatory promise of history rather than the master design of providence, nature, or necessity. Historical redemption, its protagonist Thomas Pemberton suggests, resides not at history's apocalyptic end but in the infinite responsibility to work for its utopian fufillment: "You know, it may have been Isaiah who left them [theologians] the opening. He should have made it clear, the messianic idea as a longing, a navigating principle, redemptive not on arrival but in never quite getting here" (248).

In view of these texts, I do not think that Francis Fukuyama's argument should be dismissed as mere propaganda. Instead, it should be taken very seriously. The question now is whether or not the American ideology, a nationalist master narrative, can transform itself into an international one. As Underworld's epilogue suggests, it is in the process of refiguring itself in a globalized economy of transnational cyberspace, promoting its interested version

of "America" as the end of a Universal History that knows neither cultural boundaries nor geographic limits. It is fairly easy to criticize The End of History and the Last Man for its cynical reasoning. But Fukuyama's proposition that it is impossible to imagine a future different from the present cannot be ignored. It is a challenge that can be met by historical thinking--the belief that history is constructed by human action--by putting our "puny hands," in the words of DeLillo's Klara Sax, to the great systems generated by apocalyptic logic in order to "unrepeat" the master plot of History and the real disasters of history that logic has condoned. It is a challenge, in other words, "to fiction" new histories about old ends.

Works Cited

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books, 1971. 121-173.

Anderson, John, and Hilary Hevenor. Burning Down the House: MOVE and the Tragedy of Philadelphia. New York and London: Norton, 1987.

Anderson, Perry. A Zone of Engagement. London and New York: Verso, 1992.

Arendt, Hannah. The Origins of Totalitarianism. 3rd ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966.

Ayers, David. "The Long Last Goodbye: Control and Resistance in the Work of William Burroughs." Journal of American Studies 27 (1993): 223-236.

Bal, Mieke. Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. 2nd ed. Toronto: U Toronto P, 1997.

Barthes, Roland. Mythologies. Trans. Annette Lavers. London: Jonathan Cape, 1972.

-----. S/Z. Trans. Richard Miller. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

Baudrillard, Jean. America. Trans. C. Turner. London: Verso, 1989.

-----. "The Ecstasy of Communication." In The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture. Ed. Hal Foster. Port Townsend, WA: Bay, 1983. 126-34.

-----. The Illusion of the End. Trans. Chris Turner. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994.

-----. Simulations. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.

Bawer, Bruce. Diminishing Fictions. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1988.

Bell, Daniel. The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties. Rev. ed. New York: Free Press, 1961.

Bellah, Robert N. Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

Berben, Jacqueline. "Promised Land and Wasteland in John Wideman's Recent Fiction." Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines 16 (1991): 259-270.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. The American Jeremiad. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1978.

-----. The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America. New York and London: Routledge, 1993.

Berger, James. After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1999.

Bernstein, Michael André. Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History. Berkeley: U California P, 1994.

Berressem, Hanjo. Pynchon's Poetics. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1993.

Berryman, Charles. "Ragtime in Retrospect." The South Atlantic Quarterly 81 (Winter 1982): 30-42.

Bertram, Christopher. "The End of History: One More Push!" In Has History Ended? Ed. Christopher Bertram and Andrew Chitty. Aldershot: Avebury, 1994. 152-78.

Bloch, Ernst. Principle of Hope. Trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986.

Bloch, Ruth H. Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.

Booker, M. Keith. "Vineland and Dystopian Fiction." Pynchon Notes 30-31 (Spring-Fall 1992): 5-38.

Boudon, Raymond. The Analysis of Ideology. Trans. Malcolm Slater. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1989.

Boyer, Paul. By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age. New York: Pantheon, 1985.

-----. Fallout. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1998.

-----. When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992.

Brantlinger, Patrick. Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1983.

Bray, Rosemary. "The Whole City Seen the Flames." Rev. of Philadelphia Fire, by John Edgar Wideman. New York Times Book Review 30 September 1990: 7-9.

Brooks, Peter. Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative. New York: Knopf, 1984.

Bryant, Paula. "Discussing the Untellable: Don DeLillo's The Names." Critique 29 (Fall 1987): 16-29.

Budick, Emily Miller. Fiction and Historical Consciousness. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1989.

Bumas, E. Shaskan. "The Utopian States of America: The People, the Republic, and Rock and Roll in Thomas Pynchon's Vineland." Arizona Quarterly 51 (Autumn 1995): 149-75.

Burger, Jorg. "Mr. Paranoia." Trans. Tilo Zimmermann. Die Zeit 8 October 1998. Online at: http//haas.berkeley.edu/~gardner/ddbiblio.html.

Burke, Kenneth. Attitudes toward History. Berkeley: U California P, 1984.

Burroughs, William S. Cities of the Red Night. 1981. London: Picador, 1982.

-----. "My Purpose Is to Write for the Space Age." In William S. Burroughs at the Front. Ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. 265-68.

-----. Naked Lunch. 1959. New York: Grove Press, 1966.

-----. Nova Express. New York: Grove Press, 1964.

-----. The Ticket That Exploded. 1962. New York: Grove Press, 1968.

Busby, Mark. "E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime and the Dialectics of Change." Ball State University Forum 26 (Summer 1985): 39-44.

Callinicos, Alex. Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.

Carmichael, Virginia. Framing History: The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1993.

Caute, Michael. The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978.

Chomsky, Noam. Deterring Democracy. New York: Hill and Wang, 1991.

Cleaver, Kathleen Neal. "Philadelphia Fire." Transition 51 (May 1991): 150-57.

Coleman, James W. Blackness and Modernism: The Literary Career of John Edgar Wideman. Jackson and London: UP of Mississippi, 1989.

Conner, Marc C. "Postmodern Exhaustion: Thomas Pynchon's Vineland and the Aesthetic of the Beautiful." Studies in American Fiction 24 (Spring 1996): 65-85.

Coover, Robert. Briar Rose. New York: Grove Press, 1996.

-----. Gerald's Party. New York: Linden Press, 1986.

-----. Ghost Town. New York: Henry Holt, 1998.

-----. John's Wife. New York and Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

-----. The Origin of the Brunists. New York: Viking, 1978.

-----. Pinocchio in Venice. New York and Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 1991.

-----. The Public Burning. New York: Viking, 1977.

-----. Pricksongs and Descants: Fictions. New York: New American Library, 1969.

-----. Spanking the Maid. New York: Grove Press, 1982.

-----. The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop. New York: New American Library, 1971.

Cope, Jackson I. Robert Coover's Fictions. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986.

Cowart, David. "Attenuated Postmodernism: Pynchon's Vineland." In The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon's Novel. Ed. Geoffrey Green, Donald J. Greiner, and Larry McCaffery. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994. 3-13.

-----. "Continuity and Growth: Pynchon's Vineland." Kenyan Review 12 (Fall 1990).

Darby, Tom. "Technology, Christianity, and the Universal Homogeneous State." In After History? Francis Fukuyama and His Critics. Ed. Timothy Burns. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994. 197-215.

De Certeau, Michel. Heterologies: Discourse on the Other. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1986.

Dean, Jodi. Aliens in America: Conspiracy Culture from Outerspace to Cyberspace. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998.

Debord, Guy. Society of the Spectacle. Detroit: Red and Black, 1977.

DeLillo, Don. Libra. New York: Viking, 1988.

-----. Mao II. New York: Viking, 1991.

-----. "The Power of History." The New York Times Magazine 7 September 1997: 60-63.

-----. Underworld. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

-----. White Noise. New York: Viking, 1985.

Dellamora, Richard. "Queer Apocalypse: Framing William Burroughs." In Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Practice of the End. Ed. Richard Dellamora. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1995. 136-67.

D'Emilio, John. Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1983.

Derrida, Jacques. "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism." Trans. Simon Critchley. In Deconstruction and Pragmatism. Ed. Chantal Mouffe. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. 77-91.

-----. Spectres of Marx. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge, 1994.

Dewey, Joseph. In a Dark Time: The Apocalyptic Temper in the American Novel of the Nuclear Age. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 1990.

Dickinson, Peter. "'Go-go Dancing on the Brink of the Apocalypse': Representing AIDS." In Postmodern Apocalypse. Ed. Richard Dellamora. Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1995. 219-40.

Doan, Ruth. The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1987.

Doctorow, E. L. Billy Bathgate. New York: Random House, 1989.

-----. The Book of Daniel. New York: Random House, 1971.

-----. City of God. New York: Random House, 2000.

-----. "False Documents." In E.L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations. Ed. Richard Trenner. Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1983.

-----. Loon Lake. New York: Random House, 1980.

-----. Ragtime. 1975. New York: Vintage, 1991.

-----. "The State of Mind of the Union." Nation 22 (March 1986). 331-32.

-----. The Waterworks. New York: Random House, 1994.

-----. World's Fair. New York: Random House, 1985.

Dolan, Frederick M. "The Poetics of Postmodern Subversion: The Politics of Writing in William S. Burroughs' The Western Lands." Contemporary Literature 32 (Winter 1991): 534-51.

Dreiser, Theodore. An Amateur Laborer. Ed. Richard W. Dowell, James L. West III, and Neda M. Westlake. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1983.

-----. Sister Carrie. New York: Library of America, 1987.

D'Souza, Dinesh. The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

Du Bois, W.E.B. "The Souls of Black Folk." In W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings. New York: Library of America, 1986. 357-547.

Eagleton, Terry. Ideology: An Introduction. London and New York: Verso, 1991.

Emblidge, David. "Marching Backward into the Future: Progress as Illusion in Doctorow's Novels." Southwest Review 62 (Autumn 1977): 397-409.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Sovereignty of Ethics." In Lectures and Biographical Sketches. Vol. 10 of The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904. 181-214.

Fenster, Mark. Conspiracy Theories, Secrecy and Power in American Culture. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1999.

Fenves, Peter. "The Tower of Babel Rebuilt: Some Remarks on 'The End of History.'" In After History? Francis Fukuyama and His Critics. Ed. Timothy Burns. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994. 217-237.

Fiedler, Leslie. Love and Death in the American Novel. Rev. ed. 1966. New York: Anchor, 1992.

Fogel, Stan. "Richard Nixon by Robert Coover, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes." English Studies in Canada 8 (June 1982): 187-202.

Foley, Barbara. "From U.S.A. to Ragtime: Notes on the Forms of Historical Consciousness in Modern Fiction." In E.L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations. Ed. Richard Trenner. Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1983. 158-78.

-----. Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1986.

Foucault, Michel. "Interview with Lucette Finas." In Michel Foucault, Power, Truth, Strategy. Ed. Meaghan Morris and Paul Patten. Trans. Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris. Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979. 67-75.

Fowler, Douglas. Understanding E.L. Doctorow. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1992.

Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere." In The Phantom Public Sphere. Ed. Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1993. 1-30.

Freedman, Carl. "Towards a Theory of Paranoia: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick." Science Fiction Studies 11 (1984): 15-24.

Freese, Peter. "Doctorow's 'Criminals of Perception': Or, What Has Happened to the Historical Novel." In Reconstructing American Literary and Historical Studies. Ed. Gunter H. Lenz, Hartmut Keil, and Sabine Brock-Sallah. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. 345-71.

-----. From Apocalypse to Entropy and Beyond: The Second Law of Thermodynamics in Post-War American Fiction. Essen: Blaue Eule, 1997.

Freud, Sigmund. Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Vol 18. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1953.

-----. Moses and Monotheism. S.E. 23: 1-138.

-----. "The Uncanny." S.E. 17: 217-52.

-----, with Josef Breuer. Studies on Hysteria. S.E. 2.

Frick, Daniel E. "Coover's Secret Sharer? Richard Nixon in The Public Burning." Critique 37 (Winter 1996): 82-91.

Fried, Richard M. Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.

Friedl, Bettina. "The Stability of Images and the Instability of Things in E.L. Doctorow's Ragtime." In E.L. Doctorow: A Democracy of Perception. Ed. Herwig Friedl and Dieter Schulz. Essen: Blaue Eule, 1988. 91-104.

Friedl, Herwig. "Power and Degradation: Patterns of Historical Process in the Novels of E.L. Doctorow." In E.L. Doctorow: A Democracy of Perception. Ed. Herwig Friedl and Dieter Schulz. Essen: Blaue Eule, 1988: 19-44.

Fukuyama, Francis. The End of History and the Last Man. New York: Free Press, 1992.

-----. "The End of History?" The National Interest 17 (Summer 1989): 3-18.

-----. "A Reply to My Critics." The National Interest 18 (Winter 1989/90): 21-28.

Füredi, Frank. "The Enthronement of Low Expectations: Fukuyama's Ideological Compromise for Our Time." In Has History Ended? Fukuyama, Marx, Modernity. Ed. Christopher Bertram and Andrew Chitty. Aldershot: Avebury, 1994. 31-45.

Gado, Frank. First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing. Schenectady: Union College P, 1973.

Gallo, Louis. "Nixon and the 'House of Wax': An Emblematic Episode in Coover's The Public Burning." Critique 23 (Spring 1982): 43-51.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes." Critical Inquiry 12 (Autumn 1985): 1-20.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and Cornel West. The Future of the Race. New York: Vintage, 1997.

Gehlan, Arnold. Man in the Age of Technology. Trans. Patricia Lipscomb. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.

Genette, Gérard. Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln and London: U Nebraska P, 1997.

Goldman, Emma. Anarchism and Other Essays. New York: Mother Earth, 1910.

Gordon, Lois. Robert Coover: The Universal Fictionmaking Process. Carbondale and Evansville: Southern Illinois UP, 1983.

Gross, David S. "Tales of Obscene Power: Money and Culture, Modernism and History in the Fiction of E.L. Doctorow." In E.L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations. Ed. Richard Trenner. Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1983. 120-50.

Gunn, Giles. "Beyond Transcendence or Beyond Ideology: The New Problematics of Cultural Criticism in America." American Literary History 2 (1990): 1-18.

Haaland, Bonnie. Emma Goldman: Sexuality and the Impurity of the State. New York and London: Black Rose, 1993.

Habermas, Jürgen. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.

Hague, Angela. "Ragtime and the Movies." North Dakota Quarterly 3 (1983): 101-12.

Haraway, Donna. Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.Female Man© _Meets_OncoMouse. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. "E.L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative." PMLA 100 (1985): 81-95.

Harter, Carol C., and James R. Thompson. E.L. Doctorow. Boston: Twayne, 1990.

Harvey, David. The Condition of Postmodernity. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Hassan, Ihab. "The Literature of Silence: From Henry Miller to Beckett and Burroughs." Encounter 28 (1967): 74-82.

Hatch, Nathan O. "The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America: New England Clergymen, War with France, and the Revolution." William and Mary Quarterly 31 (1974): 407-30.

-----. The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England. New Haven: Yale UP, 1977.

Haynes, John Earl, and Harvey Klehr. Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1999.

Hawkes, David. Ideology. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. The Philosophy of History. Trans. J. Sibree (1899). New York: Dover, 1956.

Henriksen, Margot A. Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age. Berkeley: U California P, 1997.

Hertzel, Leo J. "An Interview with Robert Coover." Critique 11 (Fall 1969): 25-29.

Hinds, Elizabeth Jane Wall. "Visible Tracks: Historical Method and Thomas Pynchon's Vineland." College Literature 19 (1992): 91-103.

Hofstadter, Richard. The Paranoid Style in American Politics. New York: Knopf, 1966.

Houlgate, Stephen. Freedom, Truth and History: An Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

Howard, Gerald. "The American Strangeness: An Interview with Don DeLillo." Hungry Mind Review Fall 1997: 13-16.

Huggins, Nathan I. Black Odyssey: The African-American Ordeal in Slavery. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Hume, Kathryn. "Robert Coover's Fictions: The Naked and the Mythic." Novel 12 (Winter 1979): 127-48.

Humm, Peter. "Telling Tales on the Rosenbergs." Literature and History 12 (1986): 48-57.

Hutcheon, Linda. "'The Pastime of Past Time': Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction." In Postmodern Genres. Ed. Marjorie Perloff. Norman, OK. and London: U of Oklahoma P, 1989. 54-74.

-----. A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction. New York and London: Routledge, 1988.

-----. The Politics of Postmodernism. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.

Huyssen, Andreas. Foreword to Critique of Cynical Reason, by Peter Sloterdijk. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1987.

Hyde, H. Montgomery. The Atom Bomb Spies. New York: Atheneum, 1980.

Hyppolite, Jean. Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of History. Trans. Bond Harris and Jacqueline Bouchard Spurlock. Gainesville: UP Florida, 1996.

Ickstadt, Heinz. "History, Fiction and the Designs of Robert Coover." American Studies / Amerikastudien 28 (1983): 347-60.

Jameson, Fredric. "'End of Art' or 'End of History'?" In The Cultural Turn. London and New York: Verso, 1998. 73-92.

-----. The Geopolitical Aesthetic. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992.

-----. The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act. London: Routledge, 1981.

-----. Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.

Jefferson, Thomas. Notes on the State of Virginia. Ed. William Peden. Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1955.

Jenkins, Keith. Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

Johnston, John. "An American Book of the Dead: Media and the Unconscious in Vineland." Pynchon Notes 34-35 (Spring-Fall 1994): 20-37.

Jones, Phyllis. "Ragtime: Feminist, Socialist and Black Perspectives on the Self-Made Man." Journal of American Culture 2 (Spring 1979): 17-28.

Joris, Pierre. "Coover's Apoplectic Apocalypse or 'Purviews of Cunning Abstractions'." Critique 34 (Summer 1993): 219-31.

Karpinski, Eva C. "From V. to Vineland: Pynchon's Utopian Moments." Pynchon Notes 32-33 (Spring-Fall 1993): 33-43.

Keesey, Douglas. "The Ideology of Detection in Pynchon and DeLillo." Pynchon Notes 32-33 (Spring-Fall 1993): 44-59.

-----. "Vineland in the Mainstream Press: A Reception Study." Pynchon Notes 26-27 (Spring-Fail 1990): 107-13.

Kellner, Douglas. Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Post-Modernism and Beyond. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.

Kermode, Frank. The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction .London: Oxford UP, 1968.

Ketterer, David. New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1974.

King, Richard. "Between Simultaneity and Sequence." In E.L. Doctorow: A Democracy of Perception. Ed. Herwig Friedl and Dieter Schulz. Essen: Blaue Eule, 1988. 45-60.

Kingwell, Mark. Dreams of Millennium. Toronto: Viking, 1996.

Kojève, Alexandre. Introduction to the Reading of Hegel. Trans. James Nichols. New York: Basic Books, 1969.

Kroker, Arthur, and Michael A. Weinstein. Data Trash: The Theory of the Virtual Class. New York: St. Martin's, 1994.

Kumar, Krishan. Utopianism. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1991.

Kunow, Rudiger. "Without Telos or Subject? Coover's and Doctorow's Presentations of History." In Reconstructing American Literary and Historical Studies. Ed. Gunter H. Lenz, Hartmut Keil, and Sabine Brock-Sallat. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag; New York: St Martin's Press, 1990. 372-90.

Kushner, Tony. Angels of America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. New York: Theater Communications Group, 1995.

LeClair, Tom. The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction. Urbana and Chicago: U Illinois P, 1989.

-----. In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel. Urbana and Chicago: U Illinois P, 1987.

-----. "An Underhistory of Mid-Century America." Rev. of Underworld, by Don DeLillo. Atlantic Monthly October 1997: 113-116.

LeClair, Tom, and Larry McCaffery, eds. Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Novelists. Urbana: U Illinois P, 1983.

Leithauser, Brad. "Anyplace You Want." Rev. of Vineland, by Thomas Pynchon. New York Review of Books 15 March 1990: 7-10.

Lentricchia, Frank. "The American Writer as Bad Citizen." In Introducing Don DeLillo. Ed. Frank Lentricchia. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1991. 1-6.

Leonard, John. "American Jitters." Rev. of Underworld, by Don DeLillo. Nation 3 November 1997: 18-23.

Levine, Paul. E.L. Doctorow. London and New York: Methuen, 1985.

-----. "The Writer as Independent Witness." In E.L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations. Ed. Richard Trenner. Princeton: Ontario Review P, 1983. 57-69.

Lewicki, Zbigniew. The Bang and the Whimper: Apocalypse and Entropy in American Literature. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984.

Lukács, Georg. The Historical Novel. 1962. Trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1983.

Lydenberg, Robin. "'El Hombre Invisible.'" In William S. Burroughs at the Front. Ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. 233-37.

-----. Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction. Urbana and Chicago: U Illinois P, 1987.

Lyotard, Jean-François. The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1984.

Macherey, Pierre. A Theory of Literary Production. Trans. Geoffrey Wall. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.

Madsen, Deborah L. The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon. New York: St. Martin's, 1991.

Maltby, Paul. Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon. Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1991.

Marranca, Richard. "Finding a Historical Line." In Conversations with E. L. Doctorow. Ed. Christopher D. Morris. Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1999. 207-14.

Mathy, Jean-Philippe. "Out of History: French Readings of Postmodern America." American Literary History 2 (Summer 1990): 267-298.

May, John R. Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel. Notre Dame: U Notre Dame P, 1972.

May, Lary. Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980.

Mazurek, Raymond A. "Metafiction, the Historical Novel, and Coover's The Public Burning." Critique 23 (Spring 1982): 29-42.

McCaffery, Larry. The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass. Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 1982.

-----, ed. Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

McCarthy, Mary. "Burroughs' Naked Lunch." In William S. Burroughs at the Front. Ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. 33-39.

McCoy, Craig R. "Who Was John Africa?" Philadelphia Inquirer Sunday Magazine 12 January 1986: 18-23.

McHale, Brian. Constructing Postmodernism. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

-----. Postmodernist Fiction. London and New York: Routledge: 1989.

McKibben, Bill. The End of Nature. New York: Random House, 1989.

Meeropol, Robert, and Michael Meeropol. We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Rev. ed. Urbana: U Illinois P, 1986.

Mendelson, Edward. "Levity's Rainbow." Rev. of Vineland, by Thomas Pynchon. New Republic 9 and 16 July 1990: 41-46.

Miller, J. Hillis. Fiction and Repetition. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.

Mojtabai, A. G. Blessed Assurance: At Home with the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas. Albuquerque: U New Mexico P, 1986.

Morgan, Ted. Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs. New York: Henry Holt, 1988.

Morganthau, Tom. "The Mysteries of MOVE." Newsweek 27 May 1985: 25.

Morris, Christopher D. Models of Misrepresentation: On the Fiction of E.L. Doctorow. Jackson and London: UP Mississippi, 1991.

Morrison, Toni. Paradise. New York: Knopf, 1998.

-----. Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. London: Picador, 1993.

Morton, Marian J. Emma Goldman and the American Left. New York: Twayne, 1992.

Mottram, Eric. William Burroughs: The Algebra of Need. London: Boyars, 1977.

Nadel, Alan. Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1995.

Navasky, Victor. Naming Names. New York: Viking, 1980.

Negt, Oskar, and Alexander Kluge. Public Sphere and Experience. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1993.

Nelson, Cary. "The End of the Body: Radical Space in Burroughs." In William S. Burroughs at the Front. Ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. 119-32.

Neville, John F. The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War. Westport and London: Praeger, 1995.

Niethammer, Lutz. Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End? Trans. Patrick Camiller. London and New York: Verso, 1992.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. Thus Spake Zarathustra. Vol. 11 of The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche. Trans. Thomas Common. New York: Gordon Press, 1974.

Nizer, Louis. The Implosion Conspiracy. New York: Doubleday, 1973.

Oakley, J. Ronald. God's Country: America in the Fifties. New York: Dembner Press, 1986.

O'Brien, George. Hegel on Reason and History. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1975.

O'Donnell, Patrick. "Engendering Paranoia in Contemporary Narrative." Boundary 2 19 (1992): 181-204.

O'Gorman, Edmundo. The Invention of America. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1961.

Okun, Rob A. The Rosenbergs: Collected Visions of Writers and Artists. New York: Universe, 1988.

O'Leary, Stephen. Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.

Paine, Thomas. Rights of Man, Common Sense, and Other Political Writings. Ed. Mark Philp. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.

Parks, John G. E.L. Doctorow. New York: Continuum, 1991.

Passaro, Vince. "The Forgotten Killer." Harper's Magazine April 1998: 71-76.

Philadelphia. The Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations of the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission, 6 March 1986.

Pounds, Wayne. "The Postmodern Anus: Parody and Utopia in Two Recent Novels by William Burroughs." In William S. Burroughs at the Front. Ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. 217-32.

Pughe, Thomas. Comic Sense: Reading Robert Coover, Stanley Elkin, Philip Roth. Basel: Birkhauser Verlag, 1994.

Punday, Daniel. "Narrative after Deconstruction: Structure and the Negative Poetics of William Burroughs' Cities of the Red Night." Style 29 (Spring 1995): 36-57.

Pynchon, Thomas. The Crying of Lot 49. 1965. London: Picador, 1979.

-----. Gravity's Rainbow. New York: Viking, 1973.

-----. Mason & Dixon. New York: Henry Holt, 1997.

-----. Slow Learner. Boston: Little Brown, 1984.

-----. Vineland. New York: Viking Penguin, 1990.

Quinby, Lee. Anti-Apocalypse: Exercises in Genealogical Criticism. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1994.

-----. Millennial Seduction. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1999.

Radosh, Ronald, and Joyce Milton. The Rosenberg File. 2nd ed. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1997.

Ramage, John. "Myth and Monomyth in Coover's The Public Burning." Critique 23 (Spring 1992): 29-41.

Reuben, William A. The Atom Spy Hoax. New York: Action Books, 1955.

Robberds, Mark. "The New Historicist Creepers of Vineland." Critique 36 (Summer 1995): 237-48.

Robinson, Douglas. American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985.

Rogin, Michael. "'Make My Day!': Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics." Representations 29 (Winter 1990): 99-123.

-----. "Ronald Reagan," the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.

-----. "'Make My Day!': Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics: The Sequel." In Cultures of United States Imperialism. Ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease. Durham: Duke UP, 1993. 499-534.

Rorty, Richard. "The End of Leninism and History as Comic Frame." In History and the Idea of Progress. Ed. Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1995. 211-26.

Roth, Philip. American Pastoral. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

Saltzman, Arthur. "The Stylistic Energy of E.L. Doctorow." In E.L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations. Ed. Richard Trenner. Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1983. 73-108.

Santner, Eric. "History Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma." In Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution." Ed. Saul Friedlander. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. 143-54.

Saunders, James Robert. "Exorcizing the Demons: John Edgar Wideman's Literary Response." The Hollins Critic 29.5 (December 1992): 1-10.

Schneir, Walter, and Miriam Schneir. Invitation to an Inquest. New York: Pantheon, 1983.

Shaviro, Steven. "Burroughs' Theater of Illusion: Cities of the Red Night." In William S. Burroughs at the Front. Ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. 197-207.

Skau, Michael. "The Central Verbal System: The Prose of William Burroughs." Style 15 (Fall 1981): 401-14.

Skerl, Jennie. "Freedom Through Fantasy in the Recent Novels of William S. Burroughs." In William S. Burroughs at the Front. Ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. 189-96.

-----. William S. Burroughs. Boston: Twayne, 1985.

Skerl, Jennie, and Robin Lydenberg, eds. William S. Burroughs at the Front. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991.

Slotkin, Richard. The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890. New York: Athenaeum, 1985.

Sloterdijk, Peter. Critique of Cynical Reason. Trans. Michael Eldred. Mineapolis: U Minnesota P, 1987.

Smith, Gregory Bruce. "The 'End of History' or a Portal to the Future: Does Anything Lie Beyond Late Modernity?" In After History? Francis Fukuyama and His Critics. Ed. Timothy Burns. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994. 1-21.

Strand, John. " Unquiet Ghosts." Museum & Arts Washington (January/February 1991): 22-25.

Strout, Cushing. The New Heavens and New Earth: Political Religion in America. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Strozier, Charles B. Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

Tabbi, Joseph. "Pynchon's Groundward Art." In The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon's Novel. Ed. Geoffrey Green, Donald J. Greiner, Larry McCaffery. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994. 89-100.

Tanner, Tony. "Afterthoughts on Don DeLillo's Underworld." Raritan 17 (Spring 1998): 48-71.

-----. City of Words. London: Jonathan Cape, 1971.

Therborn, Göran. The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology. London: Verso, 1980.

Thompson, John R. Studies in the Theory of Ideology. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984.

Thoreen, David. "The Economy of Consumption: The Entropy of Leisure in Pynchon's Vineland." Pynchon Notes 30-31 (Spring-Fall 1992): 53-62.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. Democracy in America. Ed. Richard D. Heffner. New York: New American Library, 1956.

Toynbee, Arnold. A Study of History. Vol 9. London and New York: Oxford UP, 1954.

Trippett, Frank. "It Looks Just Like a War Zone." Time 27 May 1985: 16-22.

Tuveson, Ernest Lee. Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1968.

Tytell, John. "The Broken Circuit." In William S. Burroughs at the Front. Ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. 149-57.

Varsava, Jerry A. "Thomas Pynchon and Postmodern Liberalism." Canadian Review of American Studies 25 (Fall 1995): 63-100.

Vattimo, Gianni. "The End of (Hi)story." Chicago Review 35 (1987): 21-30.

-----. The End of Modernity. Trans. John R. Snyder. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988.

Vidal, Gore. Armageddon? Essays 1983-1987. London: André Deutsch, 1987.

Wagner-Pacifici, Robin. Discourse and Destruction: The City of Philadelphia versus MOVE. Chicago and London: U Chicago P, 1994.

Wald, Priscilla. Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.

Wallace, Mike. Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996.

Walsh, Richard. "Narrative Inscription, History and the Reader in Robert Coover's The Public Burning." Studies in the Novel 25 (Fall 1993): 332-46.

Ward, Geoff. "William Burroughs: A Literary Outlaw?" Cambridge Quarterly 22 (1993): 339-54.

Wells, Susan. "Narrative Figures and Subtle Persuasions: The Rhetoric of the MOVE Report." In The Rhetorical Turn: Invention and Persuasion in the Conduct of Inquiry. Ed. Herbert W. Simons. Chicago and London: U Chicago P, 1990. 208-237.

White, Hayden. The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987.

-----. Metahistory. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973.

-----. Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.

Whitfield, Stephen J. The Culture of the Cold War. 2nd ed. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Wideman, John Edgar. Brothers and Keepers. New York: Penguin, 1984

-----. The Cattle Killing. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.

-----. Damballah. New York: Vintage, 1981.

-----. Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society. New York: Pantheon, 1994.

-----. The Hiding Place. New York: Avon, 1981.

-----. The Homewood Trilogy. New York: Avon, 1985.

-----. The Lynchers. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973.

-----. Philadelphia Fire. 1990. New York: Vintage: 1991.

-----. Reuben. New York: Henry Holt, 1987.

-----. Sent for You Yesterday. New York: Avon, 1983.

-----. Two Cities. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

Wilde, Alan. "Love and Death in and around Vineland, U.S.A." Boundary 2 18 (Summer 1991): 166-180.

Wilkins, B.T. Hegel's Philosophy of History. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974.

Williams, John. Fiction as False Document: The Reception of E.L. Doctorow in the Postmodern Age. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996.

Williams, William A. The Tragedy of American Diplomacy. Rev. ed. New York: Dell, 1962.

-----. A William Appleman Williams Reader. Ed. Henry W. Berger. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992.

Wills, Gary. Reagan's America: Innocents at Home. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987.

-----. Under God: Religion and American Politics. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990.

Wilson, Rob. "Techno-Euphoria and the Discourse of the American Sublime." Boundary 2 19 (Spring 1992): 205-229.

Wutz, Michael. "An Interview with E.L. Doctorow." In Conversations with E.L. Doctorow. Ed. Christopher D. Morris. Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1999. 191-200.

Zamora, Lois Parkinson, ed. The Apocalyptic Vision in America. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green U Popular P, 1984.

Ziegler, Heide, and Christopher Bigsby, eds. The Radical Imagination of the Liberal Tradition: Interviews with English and American Novelists. London: Junction Books, 1982.

Žižek, Slavoj. The Sublime Object of Ideology. London and New York: Verso, 1989.

Zurbrugg, Nicholas. "Burroughs, Grauerholz, and Cities of the Red Night: An Interview with James Grauerholz." The Review of Contemporary Fiction 4 (Spring 1984): 19-32.