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Responsibility, Freedom, and the State: Toward an Aesthetics

and Politics of Guilt in American Literature, 1929-1960

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in

Comparative Literature

by

Timothy Jeffrey Haehn

2014

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Responsibility, Freedom, and the State: Toward an Aesthetics and Politics of Guilt in American

Literature, 1929-1960

By

Timothy Jeffrey Haehn

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Eleanor K. Kaufman, Chair

This dissertation proposes a fundamental reassessment of guilt in twentieth-century American literature. I claim that guilt ought to be understood not so much in relation to the Holocaust or the history of U.S. race relations as in relation to the state. In readings of Mary McCarthy, Richard Wright, J. D. Salinger, Arthur Miller, and Saul Bellow, as well as the early Superman comics and fiction and criticism that invoke Fyoder Dostoevsky's work, this project demonstrates how authors of fiction and popular culture mobilize feelings of responsibility and guilt to symbolize anxieties over the diminished role of the state as a vehicle for public relief. As the federal government jettisoned burdens that it had borne since the Depression, the writers in question depict various mechanisms employed by individuals to absorb state burdens and to compensate for the reduced availability of state-backed relief. With renewed emphasis on existential categories such as guilt, freedom, and anxiety, I trace tensions at the core of mid-twentieth-century narratives that situate them squarely within the problematics of antistatism.

The figure of the *statesman* emerges in the late thirties and early forties as the main inheritor of state burdens. Mary McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps* (1943), Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's early Superman comics (1938-1942), and Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1942) can be read, I suggest in Chapters One and Two, as extended ruminations on how statesmen conceive their function of rendering aid to others as increasingly oppressive in direct correlation with the curtailment of federal relief initiatives. Chapter Three pauses to consider a strain of writing that celebrated antistatist sentiments by invoking (and thereby misreading) Fyodor Dostoevsky as a proponent of the guilty conscience. The first attempt of its kind to chronicle Dostoevsky's influence on an array of prominent American intellectuals, this chapter utilizes my knowledge of Russian to expose a dimension of Dostoevsky's work that is far less antistatist than his readers have presumed. Chapters Four and Five look at Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* and conclude that the celebration of antistatism found in the previous chapter did not last for long. In excavating latent discontents from Miller's and Bellow's work, I reveal a critique of antistatism implicit in guilty musings from the fifties that has gone unnoticed due to abiding Cold War biases.

The dissertation of Timothy Jeffrey Haehn is approved.

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Richard Yarborough

Eleanor K. Kaufman, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

to my parents…

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Chapter 1

The Idea of the State(sman) and the Example of Mary McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps*

I.

There is a peculiar vignette in Mary McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps* (1942) entitled "The Genial Host," in which McCarthy tells the story of a social gathering at the residence of one Pflaumen. At least two things make this something other than your run-of-the-mill social gathering. First, you have the guest-list, which constitutes a who's who of midcentury intellectual circles. As McCarthy explains, "every dinner was presented as a morality play in which art and science, wealth and poverty, business and literature, sex and scholarship, vice and virtue, Judaism and Christianity, Stalinism and Trotskyism, all the antipodes of life, were personified and abstract" (151). Second, you have the host himself, a "deferential, ingratiating" man who was ever "concerned for your pleasure, like a waiter with a tray of French pastry in his hand" (137). Pflaumen is odd not just because he goes to extreme lengths to gratify his guests but because he continues to do so despite his guests' visible aversion to his presence and despite the fact that he receives next to nothing—except perhaps a brief respite from loneliness—in the form of recompense for hosting the gatherings. For the guests, on the other hand, Pflaumen's gatherings represent little more than an opportunity for personal gain: the book's main protagonist Margaret Sargent, a clear stand-in for McCarthy herself, recognizes that acquaintance with the "genial host" means a virtually endless supply of letters of introduction

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and odds and ends jobs from one of his well-to-do guests. On the night of this particular soirée, she secures a job and a lover to boot.

The only thing Pflaumen demands in return for the various forms of help he renders his guests, whom McCarthy presents as ungrateful and parasitic, is "loyalty" (161). As Margaret finds out when she refuses to share details of a conversation with a prospective lover, this means that "Pflaumen should never be left out of anything" (161). So long as one does not overstep these bounds, Pflaumen does his best to help in any way he can. This does not, however, prevent him from straddling what in the twentieth century has proven to be a delicate line between geniality and tyranny. Margaret realizes that she is the

> perfect object of charity, poor but not bedraggled, independent, stubborn, frivolous, thankless, and proud. He could pity you, deplore you, denounce you, display you, be kind to you, be hurt by you, forgive you. He could, in fact, run through his whole stock of feelings with you…You stood to him in the relation of Man to God, embraced in an eternal neurotic mystery compounded out of His infinite goodness and your guilt. (145)

The description of the host-tyrant found in this passage does not comport with the tactics he employs while overseeing his gatherings. Having gathered guests, Pflaumen leaves the rest up to them and thus lives up to his "genial" title: "once the wine was poured, Pflaumen took very little part in the conversation. He leaned back in his chair with the air of a satisfied impresario, embracing all his guests in a smile of the most intense and proprietary affection" (149). Given Pflaumen's remoteness from the proceedings of his gatherings, Margaret's characterization of him appears harsh and therefore problematic, as does her attributing to him alone the ability to

create "the illusion of a microcosm…the sense of a little world that was exactly the same as the big world, though it had none of the pain or care" (151).

The key to understanding scenes like this one from *The Company She Keeps* lies in the "big world" McCarthy invokes. Pflaumen's gatherings are not merely a "microcosm" of the "big world" inside the novel; they are a microcosm of the world outside the novel as well. This means that the "little world" of his social gathering can be read as a reflection of developments taking place in the political and cultural arenas of midcentury America. As this dissertation will demonstrate, the dynamics at work in this scene typify a range of mid-twentieth-century literary and cultural production that, taken together, constitutes an extended narrative on what historian Alan Brinkley has termed the "idea of the state" (*Liberalism and its Discontents* 37). One can infer from Brinkley's writings that the term is meant to signify a general concept of government and its perceived role in public and civic life, from the perspective of both citizens and political figures. Critics Sean McCann and Michael Szalay have paved the way in their important work for others to consider the relationship between literature and politics in the New Deal era.[1] This study recasts discussions of the period's literary and political entanglements by illustrating how seemingly apolitical feelings such as responsibility and guilt in prominent characters of twentieth-century American literature often evince a commentary on "the idea of the state." It asks, in short, what it means for Margaret to characterize Pflaumen's guests as guilty before their host.

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[1] See McCann's *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* and *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government*. See also Szalay's *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*.

Of course, guilt is by no means a novel theme, neither in literature nor as an object of study in literary criticism. Many scholars remain interested in the rise of different forms of guilt as a result of the Holocaust, while others trace guilt to the history of US race relations or, more recently, to inherent features of liberal identity. The term "survivor" guilt refers to the first; the terms "white" and "liberal" guilt refer to the latter two, respectively. Alternately, some might accredit the proliferation of guilty musings to the introduction of Freud to broad audiences. This project does not intend to discredit these views or to minimize the many contributions that scholars from these fields have made. Rather, it aims to identify a tradition of writing about and ruminating on feelings of guilt which cuts across racial, ethnic, class, and gender lines, and which therefore does not fall neatly into any of the aforementioned categories.

Beginning in the late 1930s, Mary McCarthy, Richard Wright, J.D. Salinger, Arthur Miller, and Saul Bellow, as well as a number of ex-Communist writers and intellectuals, meditate on a form of guilt that ought to be understood not so much in relation to the Holocaust or any other commonly assumed sources as in relation to the state. This period coincides with what McCann calls a "redefinition of liberalism" (*Gumshoe America* 31), by which he means that there emerged, in the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "a changed concept of the duty and responsibility of government toward economic life" (qtd. from McCann 31). In reading FDR's speeches from the mid-1930s, one cannot help but notice his copious use of terms like *responsibility*, *burden*, or *obligation* while discussing the role of government in the enormous task of providing aid to millions of desperate Americans. Before the Democratic National Convention in 1936, Roosevelt explained that, "the brave and clear platform adopted by this convention, to which I heartily subscribe, sets forth that government in a modern civilization has certain inescapable obligations to its citizens, among which are protection of the family and the

home, the establishment of a democracy of opportunity, and aid to those overtaken by disaster" (*The Essential FDR* 117).

Liberal views regarding the role of state in economic and civic life underwent radical changes in the wake of the 1937-38 recession. Hereafter, the federal government would not assume responsibility for many of the problems that it had been actively working to solve since the Depression. No longer seen as a vehicle for public relief, government resigned itself to "compensate for capitalism's inevitable flaws" (6), as Brinkley tells us in his illuminating *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (1995). A number of events colluded to bring about these rapid changes: first, Roosevelt's obvious confusion over the best course of action to take in response to the most recent economic crisis helped to bolster conservatives, who were unhappy with many of the administration's reform measures. The 1938 and 1942 congressional elections witnessed significant gains among a growing conservative coalition, which quickly moved to solidify its victories by withdrawing from New Deal programs. Second, Roosevelt suffered at least two major political losses in what came to be known as the "court-packing plan" (Judicial Procedures Reform Bill of 1937) and in his following attempts to purge Congress of anti-New Deal members. These setbacks severely tarnished FDR's image, taking away some of his political capital and stymieing him when it came to pushing reform legislation through Congress. Roosevelt pushed ahead for a partial victory, but much of the damage to the reformist spirit of his first term and a half in office had already been done. America's entrance into World War Two in 1941 drew many of these developments to their close: from now on, Roosevelt would focus less on relief, aid, and the obligations of government, and more on mobilization for World War Two and the shaping of the postwar landscape. For at

least the next two decades, the state would be viewed primarily as a compensatory mechanism and watchman of consumer culture.

The texts to be examined in what follows reflect these epical political developments in several notable ways and tell a side of the story that has been underemphasized in historical accounts. History can tell us much about the "redefinition of liberalism" that took place during this period; about conservative victories in the aftermath of the 1937-38 recession; and about what historian William Chafe, in connection with the dismantling of relief initiatives such as CWA, CCC, FERA, and WPA, has called a "systematic assault against New Deal programs" (26). History can even give us a good sense of how these agencies—all of which had been liquidated by the early 1940s—stand as a testament to the New Deal's implicit goal of having government bear a good deal of the collective burden, as expressed in Roosevelt's 1932 campaign pledge that the state must guarantee "every man…a right to make a comfortable living" (Foner 201). But what tends to get lost in strictly historical accounts is the lived experience of people who either lost the relief they had or lost hope of ever receiving it. This situation instantiated a space for a new kind of responsible selfhood, expressed most often in elaborate, overdrawn professions of guilt. Notwithstanding the religious terminology in which Margaret couches her description, the guests' "guilt" before their host is as much a model of citizenship as it is an allusion to power dynamics. The guilt, or responsibility, of Pflaumen's guests is precisely what makes them the "perfect object of charity," since they do not make imperative demands on his aid. Composed against the backdrop of "a reign of conservative withdrawal from New Deal programs" (Chafe 26), *The Company She Keeps* displays in panoramic detail ontological adjustments that American citizens were forced to make as government abdicated responsibilities it had carried in the recent past. As we shall see in what follows, the

disappearance of the safety net provided by New Deal relief agencies inspired a variety of responses, ranging from nostalgia for aid received in the past to partial celebration of one's newfound responsibility. Nor must we forget the discriminatory practices of these agencies toward ethnic and racial minorities and women, which called out for anger, despair, and a number of other emotions.[2]

This dissertation poses the following question: If in the decidedly more antistatist climate of the 1940s and 1950s the state acted less as a means by which to alleviate the burden of the poor and disenfranchised and more as a compensatory mechanism, then how did this political-historical reality influence literary production? My research points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that as the state jettisoned responsibility for public welfare, a variety of authors mobilize feelings of responsibility and guilt in their protagonists so as to imagine how individuals might effectively absorb burdens formerly belonging to the state. Whereas critics frequently emphasize continuities in politics and art throughout this period, I wish to draw attention to equally important ruptures, departures, and reorientations, and to how the subject was left with little option but to adapt and, in the end, to compensate for those changes. The chapters can be divided into three distinct, though by no means mutually exclusive, periods: first, Chapters One and Two concern a transitionary period, when responsibility was diffused or dispersed; next, Chapter Three pauses to reflect on what I see in the main as a celebratory period, when ex-Communists and other American authors and critics evoked the work of Russian author Fyoder Dostoevsky to envision an antistatist existential state (and, in the process, contributed to

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[2] For more on women and New Deal relief, see Alice Kessler-Harris's *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America*. For more on African Americans and New Deal relief, see Chapter One of this dissertation.

longstanding misreadings of Dostoevsky); and finally, Chapters Four and Five excavate a tradition of discontent arising from the increased burdens that individuals bore in postwar America.

And so, the works can be said to fall into this general arc, but several themes closely related to responsibility and guilt run through virtually all of the texts as well, the most important being what I call "compensatory affects." I use the term *compensatory* not only because a proliferation of compensatory affects occurs in American literature at the time when the state assumes a compensatory role in the economic affairs of the nation, but also because these affects summon up the essentially compensatory technologies individuals deploy to offset the diminished role of the state. This is not, of course, to say that common affects like *pity*, *sympathy*, and *appreciation* did not have a place in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American literature; Elizabeth Barnes's work, for one, has shown this not to be the case.[3] Nevertheless, during the period in question these terms come to refer more specifically to efforts at forging new relations among members of a community so as—and this is key—to recompense for the decreased role of the state as a formidable bearer of the collective burden. Adam Smith, in his seminal account of "sympathy" or what he also called "fellow-feeling" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), claims that one of the original functions of sympathy is to "compensate" for the "bitterness" of an original "sorrow" (8). As we shall see below, sympathy still carries much the same meaning in terms of its compensatory function, only now it compensates not just for original sorrows but for drastically reduced displays of what might be called "fellow-feeling" (i.e., relief or aid) from the state.

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[3] See, in particular, *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel*.

Although most theoretical templates turn out to be inadequate in one way or another when it comes to capturing the nuances at work in mid-twentieth-century American literature, this study has benefitted from a variety of philosophical paradigms. Immanuel Kant's influential 1784 essay "What is Enlightenment?" offers an important initial point of reference. The opening lines establish in no uncertain terms the subject's responsibility for his "immaturity": words used to describe the unenlightened state or individual, such as "self-imposed," "lack of resolve and courage," and "laziness and cowardice" (41), suggest this much. Yet an unmistakable shift takes place midway through the second paragraph, just as soon as the "guardians" (41) come into the picture. According to Kant, the guardians have "taken over the supervision of men" and

> have carefully seen to it that the far greatest part of them…regard taking the step to
> maturity as very dangerous…Having first made their domestic livestock dumb, and
> having carefully made sure that these docile creatures will not take a single step
> without the go-cart to which they are harnessed, these guardians then show them
> the danger that threatens them, should they attempt to walk alone. (41)

Kant is naturally inclined to see humankind as moving—one is tempted to say, *teleologically*—toward Enlightenment, but he never adequately explains how this can be possible as long as the guardians wield the sort of powers attributed to them in this passage. If we consider this matter in the context of the subsequent distinction he famously makes between *public* and *private* reason, however, we can surmise how this apparent contradiction resolves itself.

Kant makes no further mention in the essay of the guardians, focusing instead on situations in which one ought to use either public or private reason. In the elaboration that follows it becomes evident that Enlightenment depends as much on the diminished role of guardians as on the individual's proper discernment as to when the use of public or private

reason is appropriate. In fact, Kant collapses the threat posed by the guardians into a condition of the individual's proper use of public and private reason. In a famous remark of praise for Frederick the Great of Prussia, Kant notes that, "only one ruler in the world says, 'Argue as much as you want and about what you want, *but obey!*'" (42) It may appear commonsensical that raw brute force the likes of that held by the guardians is required to issue such an imperative, but Kant obviously intended, since this is meant to be praise for Frederick the Great, to distinguish between power which asks citizens to "obey," on the one side, and power which renders citizens "docile creatures" on the other: as he notes at one point, some restrictions hinder enlightenment while others advance it (42). Hence, even as the restrictions of guardians preclude Enlightenment altogether, those of the Frederick the Greats allow for the modicum of freedom— argument—necessary for Enlightenment, as is corroborated by the fact that the latter does not presuppose a "dumb" ontology but only preserves public order. But here is the rub: only the withering away of the guardians'-kings' power can enable the responsibility (implicit, for example, in his use of the term "conscience" when a pastor correctly uses public reason [43]) Kant wishes the subject to maintain for his Enlightenment. Without this withering away, any responsibility attributed to the subject must remain suspect.

A good deal of post-Kantian thought recreates comparable dynamics whereby power or responsibility is seen as transferring from one group or entity to the individual. Sigmund Freud gives one of the more familiar accounts in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). This text serves as a rough model in the discussions that follow for how the "erection of an internal authority" (90) in the form of the super-ego or conscience comes about after the successful displacement of an external authority. For Freud, the super-ego comes into existence upon the displacement of the father as the main source of external authority. In the final analysis, the

father's authority and the super-ego act as ancillary enforcers of "civilization," a somewhat ambiguous term Freud uses to denote the cause of human guilt. Even though this dissertation insists that we must consider more historically particular and political sources of guilt in the context of twentieth-century American literature, Freud's perceptive observations have helped to conceptualize the workings of guilt in many of the texts discussed below.

No one's writings have proven to be as edifying as Friedrich Nietzsche's on responsibility and guilt. Despite historical and cultural gaps between Nietzsche and the authors in question here, Nietzsche's exposition in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) of the complex psychological mechanisms brought to bear in carrying out the slave rebellion supplies many essential concepts for understanding guilt, responsibility, and freedom in any context. According to Nietzsche, humans fall into one of two categories, either the nobles or the slaves, and this reality determines the manner in which identity is formed: whereas nobles define their identity positively in that they do so irrespectively of anyone else, slaves always form their identity in opposition to nobles. Because slaves are inherently inferior to nobles and powerless to change their lot in any fundamental way, they "compensate" (21) for the revenge they desire but know they cannot have with "imaginary revenge" (21). Nietzsche describes the compensatory mechanisms employed by slaves as signs of "ressentiment," a condition of powerlessness in which one misguidedly asserts his free will. Slaves may suffer abuse at the hands of the nobles, but they are good because they accept this abuse without fighting back, and herein lies a sort of partial salvation. Many characters in American fiction of this era, from Richard Wright's Fred Daniels to J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield to Saul Bellow's Tommy Wilhelm, display signs of *ressentiment*.

Nietzsche's work has also informed my use of the terms *responsibility*, *accountability*, and *guilt*. To be *responsible* or *accountable* is to see oneself (or to be seen by others) as wielding a degree of freedom or agency; as Hegel had noted in *Philosophy of Right*, morality implies knowledge of right and wrong and the capacity to act according to what is right. For Nietzsche, however, one is not necessarily free just because he believes himself responsible: the slaves are not free, but they nevertheless hold themselves responsible for being who they are. What often happens, then, as can be seen in the example of the slaves, is actions are (mis)construed as "conditional upon an agency, a 'subject'" (28), when in fact this is not the case. Ever skeptical of the idea of being accountable or responsible, Nietzsche would go so far as to suggest in *The Twilight of the Idols* (1888) that "men were thought of as 'free' so that they could become *guilty*" (64). While Nietzsche's notion of responsibility provides an important foundation for thinking about similar issues in American literature, the term carries a noticeably more economic connotation for the authors discussed below. Even when characters like Mary McCarthy's Margaret Sargent appear to transcend the economic or material aspects of their existence, their responsible subject positions nonetheless point either to the history of state relief and its recent demise or to underlying material concerns. McCarthy spells this out explicitly in the final vignette of the book, when we discover that among Margaret's greatest fears, and perhaps the main cause of her trauma—including her feelings of guilt—is the prospect of not being able to support herself financially and having to sell her body.

Just as Nietzsche has Genesis in mind when he remarks that man was thought of as free so that he could become guilty, so too does McCarthy when she likens the guests' relationship with Pflaumen to "Man's" relationship with "God," with Man being confronted by the truth of his "guilt" and the "infinite goodness" of God. In this way, McCarthy follows the lead of others

who similarly evoke the story of the Fall in Genesis as a trope for the responsible subjectivity many Americans experienced upon the rapid decline of government-backed relief or aid. Reinhold Niebuhr's influential works, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1943) and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), provide two of the more popular expressions of these ideas from this period. Niebuhr insists throughout his work that humans be held responsible, that they not cast themselves as "victim[s] of corrupting institutions which [they are] about to destroy or reconstruct" (*The Nature and Destiny* 94-5), and that they recognize "the reality of the evil" (17) that comes from themselves. His writings find resonance with many writers and intellectuals, including the likes of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Leslie Fiedler, Lionel Trilling, and countless ex-Communist writers who found theological imagery convenient for their confessions.

The sheer frequency with which one encounters this imagery supports our hypothesis that during this period the locus of responsibility shifts away from the state toward the American citizen. To help conceptualize this admittedly abstract idea, a rough parallel can be drawn to James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* from 1941, where he posits a "shift in the locus of sovereignty" (149) away from parliamentary bodies in the direction of administrative bureaus, which he sees as indicative of global trends in favor of statism. Except that, as I will show in the next chapter, the rise of administrative bodies should not be interpreted as unambiguous signs of a new wave of statism but as signs of incipient efforts on the part of state to disavow responsibilities carried in the past. As one-time chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission James Landis explains, administrative agencies occupy a liminal space between state and citizen, and so they can be seen as tracking how the locus of responsibility moved from the state.

II.

So in what way exactly are Pflaumen's social gatherings a microcosm of the "big world"? As is

the case in almost any social setting, everyone attending his gatherings adheres to a certain set of

rules; these unwritten rules reveal much about the "big world" from which they derive their

sustenance. Because the guests are seen—and because they see themselves—as free,

autonomous, and responsible, it is crucial that rules be set in place to protect their hard-won

freedom.[4] The primary goal of these rules is therefore to protect individual identity against

encroachments from outside forces or authority figures, especially from fellow guests and the

host. McCarthy describes the "effect produced by Pflaumen's dinners" as follows:

> contradictions you had known in yourself melted away; challenged by its opposite,
>
> your personality hardened into something unequivocal and defiant—your banners
>
> were flying. All the guests felt this. If you asserted your Trotskyism, your poverty,
>
> your sexual freedom, the expectant mother radiated her pregnancy, the banker
>
> basked in his reactionary convictions…Everybody, for the moment, knew exactly
>
> who he was. (152)

By obeying established norms at Pflaumen's gatherings, his guests collectively ensure that the

only challenge to identity is the one implicit in any confrontation with the other. And to the

extent that guests abstain from infringing on one another's identity, Pflaumen's gatherings render

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[4] It is no coincidence that there was a fascination with "freedom" around this time. From John Dewey's

Freedom and Democracy (1939) to R. A. Ansher's *Freedom, It's Meaning* (1940) to Erich Fromm's

Escape from Freedom (1941), observers display a preoccupation with the idea of the subject in Western

democracies as having recently escaped longstanding oppressive bonds.

the already diverse group of people collected for each occasion all the more diverse—or more

firm in their diversity.

That one ought to be free to flaunt identity without fear of coercion from fellow guests is

a relatively straightforward feature of Pfaumen's congregations. But this does not guarantee the

guests' protection against the significant authority of the host himself, who presents a rather

abstruse threat. On the one hand, Pflaumen's "geniality" manifests itself in the simple fact that

he does not appear to overstep the bounds of his authority. Even the manner with which he

extends invitations suggests this much. Whereas others "demand" (138) to know if you are free

on a given night before disclosing their intentions, Pflaumen tactfully informs potential guests of

important information, such as who are the other invitees, before extending—"never…baldly"

(137)—a formal invitation. In the presence of guests, too, Pflaumen is tactful and never

authoritative. On the other hand, however, McCarthy laconically remarks that, "nevertheless,

there was something too explicit about Pflaumen's invitations" (138). Never mind the

obsequiousness and the tact that ostensibly governs the host's behavior; upon further

consideration, McCarthy explains, "you realized that something else was being held in check,

something that did not fit at all with this picture of easygoing German-Jewish family life—

something primitive and hungry and excessively endowed with animal vitality" (140).

Here McCarthy alludes to a distinction often made between Jews of German ancestry and

Jews from East European countries, where the latter are stereotypically believed to be less

civilized than the former. Well, the host evidently shares more in common with East European

Jews than his German-Jewish standing would suggest. Not only does McCarthy depict "animal

vitality" as his primordial self, but she paradoxically ascribes his geniality to this animalism: in

unmistakably Freudian terms, the host's "animal vitality" has been sublimated into the signs of

his "over-demonstrative, over-polite, over-genial" (141) behavior. In other words, Pflaumen's

geniality amounts to little more than outward signs of repressed "animal vitality," and these signs

lead to his undoing "as a society man" (141) because their implicit meaning undermines his

status as an authentically genial host. "It was only when you caught a glimpse," McCarthy

clarifies,

> of the author of your happiness, ensconced there, so considerate, so unobtrusive, at
>
> the head of his table, that your conviction wavered. To the others, too, he must
>
> have been a disturbing factor, for throughout the meal there was a tacit conspiracy
>
> to ignore the host, to push him out of the bright circle he had so painstakingly
>
> assembled. Once the dinner got underway, nobody accorded him more than a
>
> hasty glance. (152-153)

Once again, McCarthy emphasizes Pflaumen's "considerate" and "unobtrusive" behavior, and

yet his guests' fear of him does not completely subside. Even though they believe themselves

independent and responsible, the guests worry lest the host is the true "author" of their

"happiness." Margaret certainly reaches this conclusion a few moments later, remarking to

herself, "you had only to look at [Pflaumen] to know that the morality play was just a puppet

show, that the other guests did not represent the things they were supposed to, that they could be

fitted into this simulacrum of the larger world" (153-154). Crucially, McCarthy's use of dual

symbolism—Pflaumen's venues are at once imagined scenes of gathering and "simulacrum of

the larger world" or "microcosms" of the "big world"—not only signals her later devotion to

realism, but also mirrors the duality implicit in the figure of the host himself. Pflaumen is both

wild beast and genial host; both "androgynous" and "hermaphroditic" (149); both an imaginary

character and, in McCarthy's words, a "simulacrum of the larger world."[5]

And what is our genial host a simulacrum of? In her rendering of Pflaumen and his

gatherings, McCarthy gives literary form to widespread beliefs as to the proper anatomy of the

body politic, with the figure of the host representing a particular instance of what Brinkley calls

the "idea of the state" (*Liberalism and its Discontents* 37). *The Company She Keeps* was not

published as a book until 1942, but many vignettes were written in the late 1930s, during exactly

the time when the "idea of the state" was undergoing fundamental changes. It is therefore

revealing that Pflaumen's main function is to provide a safe environment ("with Pflaumen you

were always perfectly safe" [137]) and, in many cases, economic assistance in the form of jobs

secured via his numerous connections, both of which are of utmost importance to Margaret, a

struggling writer. No less important is the manner with which he performs these functions: "he

was," we might recall, "deferential, ingratiating, concerned for your pleasure, like a waiter with a

tray of French pastry in his hand" (137). If during the experience of fighting authoritarian

regimes in World War Two many Americans came to the conclusion that the threat to individual

liberty posed by a strong state, or ungenial host, was greater than potential benefits to be derived

therefrom, then Pflaumen qua state registers these anxieties with striking piquancy.[6] Perhaps

[5] For more on McCarthy's insistence on realism, see her "The Fact in Fiction" in *On the Contrary*.

McCarthy was particularly concerned about the novel: "The novel in its early stages almost always

purports to be true" (255). For a critical commentary on her realism, see Michael Trask's "In the

Bathroom with Mary McCarthy: Theatricality, Deviance, and the Postwar Commitment to Realism."

[6] In *The End of Reform*, Brinkley asserts that World War II "prompted some liberals to reconsider their

own commitment to an activist managerial state. Statism, they began to believe, could produce tyranny

and oppression. However serious the structural problem of the capitalist economy, a statist cure might be

because the vast majority of people were alarmed over the possibility of returning to depression-era levels of unemployment, McCarthy effectively implies that Americans, like Pflaumen's guests, were not ready to give up government relief (i.e., the genial host) altogether. At the same time, though, Americans viewed the powers of state necessary to deliver that relief with ambivalence, if not downright fear. This is why the possibility that Pflaumen is the "author" of their "happiness" strikes them as such a disagreeable prospect, and why the guests' entering "into a conspiracy with him to hide the fact that he was a foolish, dull man whom nobody had much use for" (139) affords them the much-welcomed opportunity to deny their dependence on the host, be it for the good "wine," "rich food," or "prominent acquaintances" (139). Despite the charitable nature of the state-host on display when dishing out aid, it is feared that this same engine of relief cannot help but eventually yield to its primordial "animal vitality," examples of which were readily forthcoming as writers turned their eyes to authoritarian regimes in Europe. A life of responsibility has its downsides, Margaret clearly realizes, but it may well be more favorable than its counterpart, a strong state-host.

This study traces such engagements by American authors with the evolving idea of the state and its perceived role in civic life, thus placing at its core a renewed focus on the relationship between politics and fiction. The Cold War has provided ample material for investigating the relationship between politics and fiction since Irving Howe's 1957 *Politics and the Novel*, which remains a key point of reference. However, when politics gets marked by the

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worse than the disease" (154). Similarly, Benjamin Alpers, in *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s-1950s*, concludes that the "experience of the wartime American state led cultural producers to associate totalitarianism less with mass movements and more with a small leadership group in charge of an all-powerful state" (252).

unavoidably international and global scope of that conflict, it is easy to lose sight of the extent to which domestic political affairs shaped human relations in the twentieth century. As one-time chairman of the Securities Exchange Commission James Landis noted, the process of re-envisioning the role of the state, which was well underway by the time McCarthy's novel was published, "creat[ed] new relationships between the individual, the body economic, and the state" (5).

These changing dynamics exerted a considerable influence on the content and the thematics of midcentury American literature. Mary McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps*, to stick with our present example, chronicles the process of forging these "new relationships." As we have just seen, Pflaumen's gatherings disclose no less than a newly revised model of citizenship which stipulates guilt (read: responsibility) as a sine qua non of citizen status. In the context of Depression-era literature—the period when McCarthy matured as a writer—this would have seemed a highly dubious proposition to say the least. Alfred Kazin famously outlines in *On Native Grounds* (1942) some of the radical transformations ushered in by the Depression. Taken together, these transformations amount to no less than "a new conception of reality" (363). Among the values so abruptly "uprooted," Kazin exclaims, were many assumptions attendant on the ideal of the self-made man, as the economic crisis "deprived men of their security and left them impotent in the face of disaster" (364). "Where the American had once needed only to adapt his life to the external environment of society," Kazin writes, "he was now directly menaced by society and physically victimized by it" (365). In both the "safety" they feel and the responsibility they bear, then, Pflaumen's guests signal a clear departure from characters one so often encounters in naturalist and proletarian literature of the preceding decades.

Still other interpretations of the genial host present themselves as we more carefully consider implications of McCarthy's juxtaposition of the "big world" (which his events are a "microcosm" of) and the "little world" (the fictional gathering itself). Even though he carries out functions approximate to those of the state, it is also obvious that, in dutifully performing favors for his guests, Pflaumen of the "little world" is emphatically not the state. To the extent that he embodies this seemingly inconceivable duality of state and genial host, both equally concerned for the well being of citizens-guests, Pflaumen typifies what I call the "new statesman." I use this term in much the same way that FDR once used it: in an early attempt to lay before the American people his relief program, then-candidate Roosevelt announced that, "statesmanship and vision, my friends, require relief to all at the same time" (21). Ever insistent in early remarks like these that government relief must be "supplemented" (79) by community-based relief or aid, Roosevelt explicitly modeled government relief projects on the sort of aid rendered to and by family, friends, and neighbors in communities across the nation: "we seek not merely to make government a mechanical implement [of charity], but to give it the vibrant personal character that is the very embodiment of human charity" (118), Roosevelt explained. The following pages will show how literature of the 1940s and 1950s continually blurs the boundary between state and statesmanship, just as Roosevelt does here and as McCarthy does in the figure of Pflaumen. Thus, Pflaumen's significance extends beyond being a reflection of the evolving "idea of the state"; in performing functions comparable to those of the state, he simultaneously stands as a paragon of the individual who "supplements," to use Roosevelt's terminology, state relief efforts. Except that as the state began to disavow more and more burdens that it had borne in the past, the statesman came to conceive of his role as more than just *supplementary*.

Responsibility, Freedom, and the State traces tensions at the core of mid-twentieth-century narratives that place them squarely within the problematics of antistatism. On the one hand, for instance, authors Mary McCarthy, Richard Wright, J. D. Salinger, Arthur Miller, and Saul Bellow mobilize feelings of responsibility and guilt in protagonists so as to imagine how individuals effectively absorb burdens formerly belonging to the state. Pflaumen's dual capacity as a personification of the state when viewed in the microcosm of the "big world" and as the quintessential statesman when viewed in the "little world" of his social gathering succinctly captures this process. Far from being merely a throwback to the pre-Depression tradition of self-making, postwar fiction exhibits a preoccupation with protagonists who aspire to bear responsibility for a collective body. Often cast in universalist terms (as in the case of Plfaumen's guests, who, at least McCarthy believes, come from all walks of life[7]), the collective body so often envisioned in these writings represents sublimated progressive ambitions from the thirties, only now this reconfigured collectivist spirit points not to state burdens but to individual ones. Anticipating the pluralism of the fifties, such portrayals frequently draw on religious imagery— e.g., a Christ-like figure or the notion of bearing a cross—to highlight the dispersal of impersonal burdens. On the other hand, however, implicit in this narrative is a critique of antistatism that has gone largely unnoticed due to abiding Cold War biases. Despite the collectivist scope of burdens, this process has served to reinforce an individualist sensibility, and attempts to assume

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[7] McCarthy's highly questionable, and sometimes discriminatory, comments about homosexuals and African Americans throughout the novel suggest that this universalism was not always so universal, as we shall discuss more in what follows. Nevertheless, the point I wish to make here is merely that writers like McCarthy frequently aspire to couch their commentary on these matters in the most universalist terms available to them.

(collective) responsibility more often than not result in the protagonist's self-mortification or death. This familiar existential motif should not be read as typifying a metaphysics of death but as exemplifying a critique of individual attempts to assume excessive burdens.

Pflaumen's social events feature two vectors of responsibility: first, there is the responsibility that guests maintain for their condition, as signified by their "guilt" and the various techniques of "dispersing responsibility" (143) among them; second, there is the responsibility that Pflaumen bears for his guests. The former posits responsible selfhood as a model of citizenship or ontology; the latter puts forth a model of statesmanship. These vectors may seem unrelated but in fact they are not. Even as Pflaumen's guests are described as "object[s] of charity" (145), a formulation which implies the host's *lack* of obligation for his guests' well being, we will see in Chapter Two that the idea of people being responsible for their condition often goes hand in hand with the following counterproposition: namely, that it is incumbent on certain individuals, or statesmen, to offset the diminished role of the state by taking others' burdens on themselves. The sense of obligation statesmen feel to carry added responsibilities is so intense at times that it becomes a form of oppression.

This oppressiveness and the weight of the burdens themselves lead many statesmen to suffer serious psychological, moral, and even physical consequences from their roles as social "messiahs"—as one critic refers to the first notable statesman in American culture, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman. Without Superman's superhuman powers, future statesmen more often than not find the burdens they acquire excessive and unbearable. Although our genial host does not suffer—at least as far as we can judge—the way so many subsequent statesmen do, McCarthy sketches a counterpart to Pflaumen in the next vignette, "Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man," who does suffer. Jim Barnett is a bourgeois-intellectual-turned-Communist, and he

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enjoys a stint working on the editorial staff of a progressive journal, the *Liberal*, during the

1930s. What makes Jim Barnett such an exceptional leftist is that unlike "most men," who "had

come to socialism by some all-too-human compulsion," Jim "came to socialism freely, from the

happy center of things" (170). As is true throughout *The Company She Keeps*, McCarthy

privileges actions devoid of compulsion, and so Jim's appeal as a leftist derives from his having

freely, and responsibly, joined the radical movement. Now a sort of "mascot, a good-luck piece"

(171) for the left, a sign of the potential "conversion of the world" (170), Jim brandishes

ideological impunity in radical circles in a way others do not. As he himself realizes, this

impunity comes from the fact that "he was the Average Thinking Man to whom in the end all

appeals are addressed" (173); his status as a "Yale Man" notwithstanding, "he was a walking

Gallup Poll, and he had only to leaf over his feelings to discover what America was thinking"

(173).

     McCarthy writes of Jim's position in radical circles that "there was something sublime"

about it, "but there were responsibilities, too" (173). In his editorial role at the *Liberal*, Jim acts

as the glue holding the whole publication if not the personnel together, and so he outlasts his

colleagues, many of whom are dispelled for alleged political perfidy. Jim rationalizes his

marriage with Nancy, a well-to-do woman whose father opposes Jim's politics, "in a dim, half-

holy way": "with his marriage he had taken up the cross of Everyman" (187). These are some of

the subtle hints McCarthy inserts early in the story of Jim's sense of responsibility for others,

which emerges in full force when he quits his job at the *Liberal* in an act of solidarity with his

lover, Margaret Sargent, who denounced the magazine for its support of the Moscow Trials. He

reaches the apex of his responsibility for others at a new publication when he dedicates himself

to the "facts"—again, a central ingredient of the form of realism McCarthy advocated. Jim feels

empowered by the vast array of "facts" he has at his disposal ("nobody but a tax assessor had ever had such freedom" [241]) and "pleased" by the "great feeling of responsibility" he acquires in this role, "as if he were a priest or a God" (241). In this way, McCarthy likens Jim to Pflaumen in terms of the responsibility they both feel for the people and the world around them; but whereas Pflaumen did not suffer personally for carrying others' burdens, the same cannot be said about Jim. The latter's embrace of what turns out to be excessive burdens correlates directly with his disenchantment with politics and with life more generally, as his newfound habit of drinking, much to his wife's and friends' chagrin, attests. In addition, Jim ascribes the loss of his "primeval innocence" (246) to his affair with Margaret and, by extension, to the burdens he has borne on her behalf. Despite McCarthy's claim in an essay titled "My Confession" that her own experience as an ex-Communist did not comport with the experiences recounted in a battery of ex-radical confessions appearing around the time and shortly after *The Company She Keeps* was published, Jim's story anticipates these later instances of political apostasy in a profound way.

In McCarthy's novel and all the other works that will be discussed below, statesmanship carries with it a predominantly masculine connotation. Time and again, Margaret Sargent refuses to accept responsibility for others in the manner of statesmen, but this does not mean the consequences of the changing role of the state cannot be discerned in her life as well. An outsider on account of her politics and gender, Margaret diverges from the models put forth by Pflaumen, Jim Barnett, and Superman in that she does not feel the least bit responsible for the well being of others. Yet when it comes to the more general idea of responsible selfhood as a model of citizenship—represented in the "guilt" of Pflaumen's guests above—Margaret provides an illustrative example. In all likelihood, McCarthy did not need to look far for analogies of the individual-left-to-her-own-devices: a female writer in an intellectual circle (the so-called New

York Intellectuals) notoriously dominated by males, she knew a thing or two about trying to make it by in an adverse environment. So does Margaret. The most succinct imagery for Margaret's position in society comes by way of her divorce in the first vignette. As she soon realizes, the life of a single woman entails a great deal of responsibility:

> she would never, she reflected angrily, have taken this step [to divorce her husband], had she felt that she was burning her bridges behind her. She would never have left one man unless she had had another to take his place. But the Young Man [the only name she gives to her lover], she now saw, was merely a sort of mirage which she had allowed herself to mistake for an oasis. (19-20)

Margaret's life after divorce is thus a constant battle either to secure work—she is seen working in the vignette immediately following her divorce—or to cozy up to wealthy men in the hope that they will provide the oasis she so desperately wants but cannot obtain as a single woman. And this is absolutely what she wants: we learn from her confession to a psychiatrist in the final vignette that one of Margaret's greatest fears is becoming a "transient" and being reduced to selling her body in a "bleak[…] hotel room" (300). Therefore, it all comes down in the end to the simple fact that spinsterhood means responsibility, and even though Margaret recognizes how marriage puts constraints on her freedom, she now appears intent, with the help of her psychiatrist, to resign herself to the (unhappy) marriage she is in. Like Pflaumen's guests, Margaret demonstrates that while she is unwilling to give up comfort and security, she accepts it only with a great deal of compunction, wishing instead that she could be free and safe without the help of a benefactor.

The notion that spinsterhood comes with added responsibilities crops up in other noteworthy works of American literature during this period. No more than three years after

McCarthy's novel was published Ann Petry describes a similar situation in the case of Lutie Johnson, the main protagonist of *The Street* (1946) whose divorce initiates difficulties providing for herself and her son. An admirer of Benjamin Franklin, Lutie uses the dream of upward mobility as motivation to continue her life of drudgery. The dream of self-reliance implicit in this reference to Franklin is especially apt in this context, since Lutie and most of the novel's other female characters are African American, which means they were less likely to benefit from New Deal relief programs. Given this history of discrimination, it is no surprise that state relief does not appear a viable option for the book's characters, who either lose the relief they have or are rejected for the relief they need.[8] As if fearful of spinsterhood and the added responsibility that goes with it, almost all of the novel's female characters cling desperately to male companions.

III.

Scholars consistently remind us that the New Deal cannot be reduced to a coherent ideological position or uniform body of thought. Still, in their treatment of this period in American literary history, critics have created the impression that, while eclectic and multivalent, the New Deal was similarly so throughout much of its tenure. They create this impression by focusing on continuities of themes in New Deal literary production and by neglecting key political

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[8] Even though Lutie and her husband manage to secure state relief in providing shelter to orphans, they lose it on account of Lutie's father's rowdy drunken behavior. Another character, Mrs. Hedges, is denied state relief at a point when she desperately needs it, forcing her into the business of running a brothel. Though she achieves relative success and independence, she does so only with the help of a concerned male, Mr. Junto.

developments and their inflections in literature. I wish to alter this picture of continuity by

demonstrating how at least one epical shift in New Deal liberalism exerted a profound and

lasting influence on American literature. However much observers like Francis Fukuyama and

Samuel Huntington believe Cold War allegiances have been transplanted by fundamentally new

ones, lingering biases against statism have played a major role in shaping contemporary views of

this political history.

Recent events make the political and literary history told in what follows all the more

relevant. The most recent economic crisis and the outrage inspired by some of Mitt Romney's

comments during the 2012 presidential campaign bespeak the timeliness of revisiting

controversial, but important, questions of individual vs. government responsibility. In a speech

delivered at a private fundraising event for the 2012 presidential campaign, Romney spoke of the

"47 percent" of Americans "who are with [President Obama], who are dependent upon

government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility

to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you

name it" (MacAskill). Romney's words regurgitate by now familiar conservative talking points

which assume that welfare breeds lazy citizens. The authors in question here are united in their

proleptic concern with the flip side of this story, namely, what happens when government

severely curtails the availability of welfare benefits. This, too, has resurfaced in recent events,

though it remains largely underemphasized by pundits and news outlets. In the 2013 season-

finale of CNN's show "Unknown Parts," Anthony Bourdain visits the poverty-stricken city of

Detroit, Michigan. When city officials cease mowing grass in parks throughout Detroit, a team

of individuals assumes responsibility for mowing the grass themselves. Similar reports surfaced

about a "mystery man" who began mowing the grass at the Lincoln Memorial during the government shutdown in fall 2013 (Guttierrez).

Since this study relies on a historical method and approach, a few words are in order regarding the period leading up to the one under investigation. In a Pulitzer Prize winning study from 1956, *The Age of Reform: from Bryan to F.D.R.*, Richard Hofstadter outlines the history of Progressivism before the New Deal. If the period from 1900 until America's entrance into World War One was, as Hofstadter has it, the heyday of Progressivism, the era beginning immediately after the war witnessed the rapid decline of Progressive thought. In one of those ironies of history, the "wartime frenzy of idealism and self-sacrifice marked the apotheosis as well as the liquidation of the Progressive spirit" (275). Woodrow Wilson's painstaking efforts to link America's role in the war with "Progressive values and the Progressive language" (278) virtually ensured, Hofstadter writes, a reaction against Progressivism as part of the general disenchantment that took place in the aftermath of World War One.[9] Nor was the period that followed just a reaction against the ideals of Progressivism; it was also a time of relative prosperity induced by war and characterized by "widespread apathy, the sense of responsibility by neglect, the call for sacrifice by hedonism" (282): in short, a time of individualism. Wilson's presidency was followed by the Republican presidencies of Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover, all of whom espoused the ideal of self-making and, though to slightly varying degrees, a laissez-faire approach to the economy. Together, they introduced an "old-style conservative leadership, of a sort that the country had almost forgotten in the years since 1900" (Hofstadter 285).

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[9] For a more in-depth account of the disenchantment that took place after World War One, see Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*.

Hofstadter and others have shown how the economic crisis caused by Depression went a long way in undercutting longstanding American traditions like individualism, self-making, and the sort of social *ir*responsibility mentioned above. The ethos that formed during the 1930s simultaneously harked back to earlier Progressive ideals and introduced new ones as well. As countless writers trumpeted fierce attacks on laissez-faire individualism, many were embracing the view that only government could relieve the burdens of those in need. Roosevelt's administration devised a series of responses to the crisis, collectively known as the *New Deal*, and both the scope and the nature of this response has prompted many, including Hofstadter, to conclude that this period of government intervention was a novelty in American history. The nineteenth-century tradition of reform may have been "influenced by experience with periodic economic breakdowns," Hofstadter explains, but never was it the case that "political leaders…had to bear responsibility for curing them" (304). More so than at other times in U.S. history, the idea that the individual was "menaced by society and physically victimized by it" (365), to borrow Alfred Kazin's terms, pointed to the need for the state to assume responsibility for directly aiding the needy and for overseeing "the condition of the labor market" (Hofstadter 307).

Barbara Foley, Alan Wald, and Donald Pease, among others have conscientiously mined the proletarian and the naturalist moments in American literary history. In part thanks to their work, critics tend to distinguish such early twentieth-century traditions from midcentury American literature, in which a turn was made (often dated to *Native Son*, the last "social" novel) in favor of "psychological" and "existential"—as opposed to, say, economic—categories.[10] Literary criticism has been quick to describe these trends but far more reluctant to explain them

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[10] For a noteworthy example, see Thomas Hill Schaub's *American Fiction in the Cold War*.

in terms of homologous political developments. Ihab Hassan, in an early diagnosis, *Radical Innocence: The Contemporary American Novel* (1961), describes authors' preoccupations as revolving around the idea of a "modern self in recoil" (11). Hassan uses these terms to denote an array of guilty musings in modern literature that ultimately date back to the work of Fyoder Dostoevsky. I will suggest in Chapter Two that Hassan's conclusion is predicated on a set of assumptions about the Russian author's work which typifies a pattern of (mis)reading Dostoevsky—and, most especially, the Underground Man—as a proponent of the guilty conscience. Whereas Hassan and others thus attribute the widespread interest in the guilty conscience found during this period to seemingly apolitical concepts like the "individual in recoil," I contend that contemporaneous political dynamics underpin these concerns.

More recent interventions demonstrate the inadequacy of formalist approaches like Hassan's; on the flip side, however, they show little concern for psychological and existential categories such as guilt. In one fine recent critical account *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (2005), Andrew Hoberek reinscribes economic categories into the interpretation of post-1940 literature, thereby reversing the common practice of discussing these texts only in their own psychological and existential terms. Literary criticism must build on important contributions like Hoberek's to resituate these psychological-existential categories rather than replace them altogether. That is, we must combine the phenomenological side of human experience gleaned from these categories with a rigorously historical, political, and economic approach, and in this way reveal the cultural and social underpinnings of guilt. Only this framework can properly position the midcentury concern for what Hofstadter notes are quintessentially Progressive terms, "conscience, soul, morals…shame, disgrace, sin" (320), as part and parcel not of the reformist spirit of old but,

instead, of a distinctly conservative effort to bolster leaders concerned with lessening the burdens and the responsibilities of government. These terms may share the same "Protestant Anglo-Saxon moral and intellectual roots" (320) that Hofstadter mentions, but they evoke a new symbolism aimed at essentially non-reformist ends.

Bruce Robbins's *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State* (2007) provides a recent example of the abiding tendency to neglect the political and the historical developments that undergird the readings below. There is one chapter on American literature, entitled "'It's not your fault': Therapy and Irresponsibility from Dreiser to Doctorow," whose scope, as the title suggests, spans virtually the whole of the twentieth century, beginning with Theodore Dreiser's *The Financier* (published in 1912) and ending with E. L. Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate* (1989) and Gus Van Sant's film *Good Will Hunting* (1997). Because the book claims to be a "history of the welfare state," it may come as a surprise that what interests Robbins is not so much the historical developments of the New Deal or its literary corollaries, but rather the extent to which social commentators and writers alike were, in Robbins's view, absorbed in the same problems, namely, in issues like "therapy" and "irresponsibility." In a representative passage, Robbins mentions David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), Philip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966), and Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978), and then goes on to claim:

> In one way or another all of these books announce the rise of a new, socialized, other-directed model of American character that has replaced or is fast replacing sturdy American individualism. To varying degrees, they see people asking for help from government and experts instead of doing it themselves. They see the

rise of the welfare bureaucracy taking the place of the ethic of self-reliance and

undermining the characteristic expression of that self-reliance, the Horatio Alger or

"American Dream" story of upward mobility. (87-88)

As is almost inevitable when such an enormous span of history is covered in just over

forty pages, Robbins's reading presents a vastly oversimplified view of this complex history.

Most notably, we will see in this dissertation that there was an equally if not more common

tendency for writers to depict people *not* turning to the government for help. Time and again,

authors meditate on scenes in which people do for themselves and others what government is

newly unwilling or unable to do. This is why the various mechanisms used to compensate for

the diminished role of the state left such a clear imprint on American literature for at least the

next two decades, as writers struggle to elucidate the effects of the increased burdens that

individuals bear. Keeping this in mind gives us added perspective not just on recent critical

accounts like Robbins's but on notions of selfhood from this time as well.

Consider, for example, the same work by Daniel Riesman that Robbins lists above as an

exemplary critique of the perceived tendency of statism to breed irresponsibility. As we will see

in Chapter Five, the transition from inner-directed to other-directed personality that Riesman

posits in *The Lonely Crowd* has often been mistaken with an impulse directly opposed to

Robbins's hypothesis, which is to admit responsibility by looking to secure help from

community and family rather than from government. When Tommy Wilhelm—the main

character of Saul Bellow's 1956 *Seize the Day*—tries to secure from others "sympathy," or what

Adam Smith notably termed "fellow-feeling" (2), he is not merely exhibiting signs of other-

directed personality; he is also searching for ways to compensate for the postwar state's

lackluster support for public welfare. What's more, Tommy displayed signs of inner-direction

not in a distant past when he might have been an entrepreneur or a self-made man, as Riesman's

model suggests, but when he knew that, in the event of failure, he could fall back on relief from

the state. We thus learn that Tommy tapped the services of the state (as did Bellow himself)

when he worked for the WPA after failing to become an actor in Hollywood, and this incident

has exerted a tremendous influence on the formation of his selfhood ever since. Since neither

Tommy's nor Bellow's resorting to state relief was an attempt to get the state to do something

they themselves otherwise could have done, *Seize the Day* can be read as a critique of postwar

antistatism and an attempt to resurrect the often-traduced history of New Deal relief programs.

The novel represents a particularly important moment in American literary history, inasmuch as

it foreshadows efforts made in the sixties by African American writers such as Chester Himes to

utilize what one critic recently termed "selective statism" (Gram 245) as a platform to launch

civil rights campaigns.

IV.

The remainder of this dissertation will elaborate on these themes and explain their relation to

other prominent themes in midcentury American literature. In Chapter Two, I will examine

Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" and the early Superman comics and show

how they profile the evolving idea of the state and the rise of a new kind of statesman. In "The

Man," Wright abandons the more strictly racial concerns of his earlier fiction, and in this way,

the oppression Fred Daniels strives to free himself from becomes virtually equivalent to statist

oppression. The novella thus reflects concerns during World War Two over the rise of

Totalitarianism in Europe and the struggle of the individual to emancipate himself from such

forms of oppression. Yet where thinkers such as Erich Fromm have read this "freedom from" as

giving way to decidedly individualist concerns, both "The Man" and the early Superman comics

suggest, on the contrary, that the act of emancipating oneself from once oppressive forces

pointed as if of necessity to the need to bear others' burdens. First appearing in 1938, the comic

hero Superman embodies the most notable example of this tendency. For Siegel and Shuster, the

creators of this iconic figure, Superman's exceptional powers raise no concerns that he might use

them to transcend morality, as in the most obvious case of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*; instead,

Superman decides early on—and as if there were no other options—that he must assume the role

of a "champion of the oppressed…sworn to devote his existence to those in need." Richard

Wright's Fred Daniels represents a logical extension of Superman: initially a victim of racism

and coercion, Daniels transcends the world that wronged him only to cast himself as responsible

for all of humanity.

Chapter Three examines the cultural reception of Russian author Fyoder Dostoevsky in

American intellectual circles. By scrutinizing readings and invocations of Dostoevsky in the

work of Philip Rahv, Irving Howe, Arthur Koestler, Whittaker Chambers, Arthur Schlesinger Jr.,

Eugene Lyons, and J. D. Salinger, I show how Dostoevsky's readers (mis)read him as a

proponent of the guilty conscience and an unambiguous antistatist. Working with Dostoevsky's

texts in the original Russian language allows me to see a different dimension of his work that is

far less antistatist. Aside from calling attention to a distinct pattern of misreading Dostoevsky,

this chapter elucidates the social and the political climate which informed that misreading. I

conclude that the vast majority of misinterpretations can be traced to the practice, adopted by ex-

Communists such as Lyons, Chambers, and Koestler, of turning to *Notes from Underground* as a

model for political apostasy. This common practice has served to conflate the Underground Man

with both the author himself and the spirit of his art more generally, and thus ex-Communists

and others have overlooked, as I demonstrate in my explication of *Notes*, the inherent polyvalence that must be placed at the center of every reading of Dostoevsky.

The fourth and fifth chapters look at Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956) and excavate a tradition of discontent arising from the increased burdens that individuals bore in postwar America. Discontent can be discerned in Miller's and Bellow's similar use of terms such as "appreciation" and "sympathy," which recur with striking frequency and, in each case, represent the main protagonist's sole means of relief from present ailments. Yet neither appreciation nor sympathy amounts to adequate relief; rather, because they merely mitigate somewhat the symptoms of each character's affliction, appreciation and sympathy stand as examples of what I call *compensatory* forms of relief. Whereas critics have interpreted Tommy Wilhelm's pleas for sympathy in Bellow's novel as indicative of what David Riesman called "other-directed" character, I contend that sympathy and appreciation must be seen as descending directly from terms like "relief," "help," and "aid," as exemplified by New Deal relief programs such as CCC, CWA, FERA, and WPA. The driving force behind the inflection of these terms—and behind their newly *compensatory* function—has to do, Miller's and Bellow's work implies, with the history of the decline of state-backed relief initiatives: all of the agencies mentioned above had been liquidated by the early forties as part of what Chafe has termed "a systematic assault against New Deal programs." To the extent that sympathy and appreciation evoke the state relief efforts from which they derive but for which they fail adequately to compensate, Miller and Bellow can be said to engage in a critique of antistatism.

By simultaneously analyzing literary history, media and art forms, and narrative structure, this study resituates guilt within twentieth-century intellectual thought, and in doing so makes a significant intervention in recent discussions about New Deal literary production. For while

scholars have consistently reminded us that the New Deal cannot be reduced to a coherent ideology or uniform body of thought, literary criticism has tended to emphasize themes, imagery, and motifs that extend throughout the New Deal; this practice has in turn created the impression that, while eclectic and multivalent, the New Deal was similarly so throughout its tenure. The current project not only endorses a more historically rigorous approach in order to alter this picture of continuity but also locates a pivotal turning point in New Deal politics that fundamentally shaped American literature and culture for at least the next two decades (and beyond).

Chapter 2

The Rise of the Statesman: Early Superman Comics and Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived

Underground"

On first reading, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's early Superman comics (1938-1941) appear to

share little in common with Richard Wright's roughly contemporaneous novella "The Man Who

Lived Underground" (1944).[11] Aside from obvious generic differences, Superman possesses

superhuman powers that place him outside the law if not always above it (as we will see, he

often comes into conflict with local authorities), and he exudes an aura of confidence and

invincibility, attributes that have since become trademarks of the superhero genre to which he

almost single-handedly gave birth. The main protagonist of Wright's lesser-known novella, by

contrast, whose name we learn only when he types "freddaniels" on a stolen typewriter (55), is

looking desperately for a place to hide after fleeing police custody when the story opens. Before

making his getaway, Daniels was falsely accused of murder and forced to sign a confession;

without the power to leap tall buildings in a single bound, he gains respite from police

persecution only by hiding in an underground maze of tunnels, caves, and sewers. The ending

even more conclusively establishes his physical impoverishment vis-à-vis Superman: Daniels is

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[11] Wright biographer Michel Fabre has established that the story was originally intended to be the third

section of a longer piece, which the author began writing in 1941. Wright published this third section on

its own as "The Man Who Lived Underground" in 1944.

shot dead in the sewer that recently provided him safety by one of the same policeman who dragooned him into confessing to murder.

In fact, however, Superman and Daniels share a good deal in common. Above all, the two characters are united by an inclination to cast themselves as responsible for others, as bearing burdens that are not just their own, and they both—though each in his own way—charitably dedicate the powers they wield (or acquire in Daniels's case) to the noble work of helping others. Clark Kent's superhero alter ego is inspired by his early decision to "turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind" (4); Superman, in his own turn, famously champions the "oppressed" and "devote[s] his existence to helping those in need" (4). Since we have become accustomed at least since the rise of the Cold War to comic plots that pit superhero(es) against super-villain(s), it is easy to forget the incomparably more social and economic problems—arising from the doings of greedy entrepreneurs, corrupt (local) politicians, or the impersonal workings of industrial capitalism—against which Superman frequently battled in the early comics on behalf of "those in need."

In the case of Wright's protagonist, the issue of responsibility is more subtle and complex. Upon retreating underground, this once powerless man endeavors on an existential excursion that culminates in his feeling "a great sense of power" (70). Daniels—or "the Man," as I shall refer to his empowered self—never dons a costume of tights and a cape, but his transformation is nevertheless so complete that in certain key moments (e.g., when he reflects on loot [diamonds, money, and jewelry] that he took from a safe, or when he observes a young boy and night watchman being punished for his crimes) the power he believes himself to have come in possession of rivals even Superman's. However illusory this sense of empowerment might be in light of his murder, it points as if of necessity to the need for him—à la Superman—to help

people, even at great expense to himself. Thus, the Man returns aboveground to generalize his experience so that others might also be "governed by the same impulse of pity" (89). Marching off to what will be his death, he is revealingly overcome with a "mood of high selflessness" and sings to himself "I got Jesus in my soul" (88). The policeman who commits the callous murder justifies his act by explaining that "you've got to shoot [the Man's] kind" lest they "wreck things" (92), but in addition to being an act of violence against the Man, this final moment marks the apotheosis of the Man's own tendency, acquired underground, to negate his self for the sake of others, whom he has recently come to "love" (86).

Cultural theorists often emphasize how Superman, in particular, and early comics in general endorse the broadly welfarist ethos of the 1930s. Bradford W. Wright, in *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001), goes so far as to claim that many superheroes "assumed the role of super-New Dealers" (24). In a similar vein, critics Michael Szalay and Sean McCann posit close ties between politics and literary production in the New Deal era. McCann's account of hard-boiled crime fiction, for instance, illuminates the ways the "genre's major writers echoed the rhetoric that ran through the contemporaneous development of New Deal liberalism" (5). This chapter builds on scholarship in cultural studies and literary criticism to situate the early Superman comics and "The Man Who Lived Underground" within a particular cultural, literary, and political history. Following McCann, I read Siegel and Shuster's comics and Wright's novella as chronicling the "contemporary redefinition of liberalism" (McCann 31); they accomplish this task by depicting a manner of reacting to and compensating for the diminished presence of public relief or aid. I therefore depart from Bradford Wright's neat conflation of superheroes and New Dealers on the grounds that his gesture expresses at best only a half-truth, inasmuch as it presupposes a more or less

static political agenda on the part of New Dealers. As historian Alan Brinkley has demonstrated in *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (1995), this time in American history witnessed epical changes in the policies and assumptions subtending New Deal liberalism. Not only did the state come to play a markedly more "compensate[ory]" (6) role—as opposed to the "reformist" one it had played throughout the 1930s—but it began to abdicate responsibilities for public relief that it had assumed since the Depression.

The common desire of both Superman and the Man to bear others' burdens exemplifies a particular reaction to the diminished role of the state as a vehicle for public relief. In this respect, the two works engage a broader set of concerns over, in Brinkley's terms, the evolving "idea of the state" (*Liberalism and its Discontents* 37) and over the concomitant rise of what I shall call the *statesman*. In a speech to the 1932 Democratic National Convention, then-candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt adumbrates his plan for providing much-needed relief from the economic penury caused by Depression. FDR explains that, "statesmanship and vision, my friends, require relief to all at the same time" (21). As numerous scholars of the New Deal have noted, the actual record of government relief programs would prove that "all" meant primarily white men, who benefitted from public aid far more than members of ethnic or racial minorities or women. That said, for Roosevelt and the vast majority of original New Dealers, "statesmanship" connoted a broad, concerted effort on the part of government and community leaders to deliver aid. The state should not be seen as the sole source of aid, Roosevelt insists in utterances from this period, but rather federal aid must be "supplemented" (79) by community-based aid or charity. Interestingly, the president's words before the Democratic National Convention in 1936 stand as a testament to the way public works initiatives—by then aiding more than three and a half million Americans on federal payroll—were explicitly modeled on

charity rendered to and by family, friends, and neighbors in communities across the nation: "we seek not merely to make government a mechanical implement [of charity], but to give it the vibrant personal character that is the very embodiment of human charity" (118). In a gesture not uncommon at the time, FDR effectively blurs the line between state and statesmanship by folding the one into the other.

Even as government relief was to be "supplemented" by various forms of charity, the state nevertheless bore the brunt of the burden, and so it is important not to understate its role in all of this. Richard Hofstadter and others have characterized this period of government intervention as unprecedented in American history. The nineteenth-century tradition of reform may have been "influenced by experience with periodic economic breakdowns," Hofstadter writes in *The Age of Reform: from Bryan to F.D.R.*, but never had it been the case that "political leaders…had to bear responsibility for curing them" (304). One need not look farther than Roosevelt's speeches from the mid-1930s for confirmation of Hofstadter's assessment; FDR makes copious references to the "responsibility," "burden," or "obligation" of government in addressing the looming economic crisis. "Our responsibility for the immediate necessities of the unemployed has been met by the Congress through the most comprehensive work plan in the history of the nation" (97), Roosevelt remarked while announcing his works relief program. In the speech before the Democratic National Convention in 1936 cited above, Roosevelt recapitulates this point: "the brave and clear platform adopted by this convention, to which I heartily subscribe, sets forth that government in a modern civilization has certain inescapable obligations to its citizens, among which are protection of the family and the home, the establishment of a democracy of opportunity, and aid to those overtaken by disaster" (117). The administration's undertakings would not go unnoticed: one Washington Post editorial wrote that,

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"there is no parallel in history for a successful effort by any government, perhaps excepting that of Soviet Russia, to create direct employment for an army of 3,500,000 people, as Mr. Roosevelt asks the Congress to make it possible to do" (Taylor 163).

As historian William Chafe points out, however, New Deal relief agencies such as CCC, FERA, CWA, and WPA—for which candidate Roosevelt was garnering support in remarks cited above—were all liquidated by 1943 as part of "a systematic assault against New Deal programs" (26). The economic upsurge brought about by America's mobilization for World War II marked the end of the Depression and prompted many to believe that New Deal relief agencies were no longer needed. Furthermore, the wartime experience of fighting authoritarian regimes, Brinkley tells us, served to reinforce like-minded views; the war both "discouraged American liberals" and "forced them to reassess their positions" (154) in favor of markedly more antistatist policies. "Perhaps inevitably," Brinkley concludes, "[the war] prompted some liberals to reconsider their own commitment to an activist managerial state. Statism, they began to believe, could produce tyranny and oppression. However serious the structural problems of the capitalist economy, a statist cure might be worse than the disease" (154).

The early Superman comics and "The Man Who Lived Underground" resolve problems arising out of these changing realities in remarkably similar ways. By assuming responsibility for the well being of others in the way that they do, Superman and the Man effectively absorb burdens formerly belonging to the state, and this remains a fundamental condition of their statesmanship. Oxford English Dictionary holds that a *statesman* is "a person (esp. a man) who takes a leading part in the affairs of a state; a skilled, experienced, and respected politician" (*OED online*). Needless to say, statesmen have traditionally been associated closely with the state they serve—the word is taken from the French term *homme d'état* (literally "state's

man")—and have had their powers conferred on them by the state. The examples of Superman and Fred Daniels, however, indicate that statesmanship in midcentury America no longer requires such close governmental ties. While it is true that Superman has often been seen as sharing close ties with the federal government—even though, as we shall see below, his grass roots beginning and the manner in which he renders aid suggests these ties should not be overstated—no one could possibly say the same about Wright's protagonist. The Man deliberately remains throughout much of the story as far removed from state power as possible (having been a victim of it), and when he does decide to return aboveground, that decision proves fatal. Because their statesmanship is self-appointed rather than conferred on them by a state, the figures of Superman and the Man enact compensatory mechanisms employed by individuals to counteract the withering away of government relief.

"The Early Superman and the Administrative Process"

A recent anthology devoted to the comic book hero underscores the dramatic transformations that Superman has undergone over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As the editor puts it,

> Superman began as a crusading social avenger at the end of the Great Depression, became a patriotic hero during World War II, saw his powers increase in the early years of the Cold War, entered a period of flux during the Vietnam War, was killed and returned at the end of the Cold War, and has looked for his place in the superhero world since the turn of the century. (Darowski 2)

The contributors to the anthology, appropriately titled *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times* (2012), offer much insight into the complex array of social, cultural,

historical, and other factors that animate Superman's mutations. Yet by focusing just on his different guises, they lose sight of the original Superman (the "social avenger" of the Depression era) and of the impulses, fears, and anxieties which both inspired his creation in the minds of high school students Siegel and Shuster and made him so appealing to audiences across the nation. This section therefore focuses on the earliest comics, from Superman's appearance in *Action Comics* in 1938 until roughly the time of America's entrance into World War Two in 1941.

It turns out that superhero comics would not remain as capable of commenting on political and social issues as the early Superman comics. In his seminal *Comic Books and America, 1945-1954* (1990), William W. Savage, Jr. proposes that, "it was precisely the concern of comic books with controversial issues that brought them under scrutiny by critics who decried their pernicious influence on young minds" (x). "By 1954," Savage writes, "the sound and fury of the critical attack drove most comic-book publishers out of business and resulted, until about 1980, in a sanitized, if not sterile, product that avoided social commentary as if it were the plague" (x). Recent scholarship suggests that Savage's assessment holds largely true for post-1980 comics as well. Isaac Cates, in a piece written for *American Literature*, discusses the potential for contemporary superhero comics to transcend their penchant for self-reference and self-commentary in favor of engaging political or ideological questions. Cates concludes that although "it is certainly possible for a superhero story to advance a claim or an inquiry about a serious theme external to the genre" (842), this is not, in practice, their main concern: "even the best superhero comics have trouble anchoring their arguments outside of their unrealistic worlds" (842).

One of the first things to stand out when considering the long list of subsequent superheroes alongside the original Superman is the extent to which the basic terms of artistic and symbolic practice have been inverted. If comics have tended for some time now to avoid "social commentary" or, at the very least, to relegate the social and the political to epiphenomenal concerns, thus giving rise to a mostly self-enclosed genre of graphic writing aimed at a small group of what Douglas Wolk aptly termed "superreaders" (qtd. from Cates 836), the early Superman comics, in stark contrast, appear principally concerned with the real-world referents— be they political, social, or economic—of the metaphoric devices they employ. For this reason, I take as my example Savage's early "effort to employ comic books as primary sources" (xi) in order to show how the Superman comics reflect on and resolve political dilemmas arising from the evolving "idea of the state" and provide an important prehistory for subsequent statesmen, such as Wright's the Man.

When the first Superman comic appeared in April (cover dated June) of 1938, the economic recession of 1937-38 had been lingering for more than a year. The recession had delivered its heaviest blow to New Dealers by the time Siegel and Shuster's comic hit the stands. At the close of winter 1937-38, "industrial production had dropped by more than 40 percent; corporate profits had fallen by 78 percent; four million more workers had swelled the already large unemployment rolls; the national income had slipped by 13 percent from its post-1929 peak of the previous summer" (Brinkley 29). The Roosevelt administration's apparent confusion in the wake of the recession added more salt to the wounds of New Dealers, prompting an "intense ideological struggle…to define the soul of the New Deal" (Brinkley 30). From now on, Brinkley argues, liberals would abandon the reformist agenda that had characterized recent policy making in favor of a new vision for government as fulfilling a "compensate[ory]" (Brinkley 6) function.

This newly re-envisioned role of government came to be known by most Americans as Keynesianism, which sought less intrusive ways for the state to manage economic crises.

In this climate, Superman undoubtedly presented a much-welcomed image of resolution and fortitude in the face of what seemed another impending economic disaster. His sinewy, muscular build, which was influenced by Joe Shuster's interest in bodybuilding (Jones 69), together with the prominent, striking features of his face, render him a paragon of white masculinity. This, combined with his ability to escape the awkward, bespectacled guise of his alter ego at will, surely accounts for his enormous lure among those who, like his Jewish creators, were outsiders in American society.[12] More broadly speaking, Superman's concern for the "common man" (22), as Bradford Wright puts it, would have been a source of appeal for millions of Americans suffering from the consequences of Depression and recession. On the opening page of the first comic, he decides he must serve as a "champion of the oppressed" (4) and "devote his existence to helping those in need" (4). He carries out his self-appointed duties to the "oppressed" by fighting different forms of economic and political misconduct. In the July 1938 comic, for example, Superman forces a munitions dealer to enlist alongside him in the army so that the latter, after falling under a barrage of enemy fire, learns to hate war and agrees to cease munitions manufacturing. Not just stopping with those who benefit financially from war, Superman kidnaps the commanders of the opposing armies and arranges for them to settle the conflict in a battle between themselves. When Superman informs the commanders that the conflict between them had been concocted for the purpose of selling munitions, they shake hands and desist fighting.

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[12] For more on Siegel's and Shuster's experience in school, including their friendship, see Gerard Jones 63-86.

Other early stories address concerns of the "common" or working classes even more explicitly. In the August 1938 issue Superman rescues a miner from a collapsed mine, along with the rescue crew that also got trapped in the mine's rubble. When the miner comes to himself, he tells Clark Kent how the tragedy could have been prevented if only the mine's proprietor had shown due concern for worker safety. As it is, the mine was riddled with hazardous working conditions and faulty safety devices. After learning of this, Kent confronts the mine owner to inquire whether the negligent proprietor has offered the injured miner a pension or repaired the mine's safety devices. Clearly loath to address either concern, the owner responds, "there are no safety-hazards in my mine. But if there were,—what of it? I'm a business man not a humanitarian!" (36) To awaken the owner to the truth of his treacherous dealings, Superman arranges for a cave-in while the owner is entertaining guests in the mine, and then rescues them only once they discover that the safety devices are malfunctioning. Naturally, this experience is enough to induce the mine owner to pledge that from this moment on his mine will be the "safest in the country" and his "workers the best treated"; "my experience in the mine," he explains, "brought their problems closer to my understanding!" (44)

Superman's status has a significant bearing on the way we interpret the aid he renders. Historians and cultural theorists often classify Superman as an unambiguous spokesman for and defender of the New Deal. Because "the distance between the American dream and reality seemed particularly large during the Great Depression," Bradford Wright explains, "the old heroes seemed out of touch with the suffering millions" (10). It is worth noting in connection with this that Siegel and Shuster's superman morphed during the 1930s from one of the "old heroes" Wright mentions into one of the new heroes, in touch with the "suffering millions." As Thomas Andrae reports in "From Menace to Messiah: The History and Historicity of Superman,"

the Superman we have come to know from the early comics emerged directly out of an earlier figure (written for a science fiction fan magazine, *Science Fiction: The Advance Guard of Future Civilization*) who was, Andrae's title suggests, "menace" rather than "messiah." Andrae's findings raise important issues pertaining to Superman's "historicity." From Plato's Gyges to Nietzsche's Übermensch to any number of "menace" heroes one can think of, super-powers have been seen as prompting their beholder to transcend morality or to put those powers to use in various sadistic power-lust schemes, often with the intent of enslaving or otherwise exploiting people. By abstaining from the use of his powers for such purposes, Superman became an emblem of sentiments at the core of New Deal culture.

Andrae and others are right therefore to conclude that Superman's decision—again, as if there were no other option—to "turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind" (4) makes him a clear symbol of the "collapse of the Horatio Alger ethos of laissez-faire individualism and its replacement by the experimental collectivism of the New Deal" (Andrae 125). The superhero's mutation from "menace" to "messiah" signals, if not complete alignment with the state (which would come later, during the war years), then at least a close partnership with it: "The social changes prescribed by the early Superman stories," writes Andrae, "are easily assimilated into the New Deal philosophy of expanded governmental power to regulate the abuses of the economic system and discipline industry, provide social security and public relief, and protect the rights of workers and minorities" (131). Following a similar line of reasoning, Bradford Wright will all but conflate superheroes with the state. "By pointing out the failings of local government and the dangers of provincial demagogues…comic books endorsed the need for outside intervention and tacitly stressed a common interest between public welfare

and a strong federal government. In this context, superheroes assumed the role of super-New Dealers" (24).

For Andrae and Wright, then, the early Superman comics espouse a pointedly Rooseveltian notion of statesmanship. In their reading, Superman epitomizes the essence of Roosevelt's call for government and community leaders to join together in providing "relief for all." Teaming up with government to aid those in need, the early superhero figure might even be seen from this perspective as mimicking Roosevelt's gesture of blurring the line between state and statesmanship, as Wright's neat fusing of superheroes and "super-New Dealers" implies. The main problem with Andrae's and Wright's otherwise fine accounts is that they neglect the actual historical trajectory of the "idea of the state"; by presupposing a more or less static New Deal political agenda, they fail to consider the full implications of the patent truism that Superman *is not* the state. To be sure, the superhero's one-man crusade to rid the world of an impressive array of problems—ranging from corruption and greed to seemingly trivial, at least for a superhero, problems like alcoholism—gives good cause to align him closely with the state. But there comes a time when his crusade signals a new kind of statesmanship, and this occurs when his efforts to deliver aid to Americans upstages, as it were, the state in the same project. At precisely this moment, the superhero no longer stands merely for the spirit of the original New Deal as exemplified in Roosevelt's idea of statesmanship but also enacts contemporary efforts, on the part of government and authors of fiction and popular culture, to imagine how certain individuals—namely statesmen—effectively absorb responsibilities formerly belonging to the state. Rather than representing a supposedly static "New Deal philosophy," as Andrae suggests, Superman portends changes taking place within New Deal liberalism itself.

In an early history of the New Deal from 1944, Basil Rauch begins by noting that the "purpose" of his book "is to examine the evolution of the policies of the Roosevelt administration from 1933 to 1938" (v). "Historians and commentators," Rauch adds, "have usually assumed that the New Deal is a single body of policies expressive of a single political philosophy, however they may picture it as torn by contradictions and patched by opportunism" (v). Rauch distinguishes between the "First New Deal" (1933-34) and the "Second New Deal" (1935-38) and asserts that since 1938 "no important new reform law has been passed" (vii). More recently, Brinkley points to this same period—focusing especially on the aftermath of the 1937-38 recession—as the beginning of a shift away from an essentially reformist agenda in favor of increasingly antistatist policies. Whereas original New Dealers persistently worked to "reform" the economic system of industrial capitalism, liberals had given up on the "larger dream…of somehow actually 'solving' the problems of modern capitalism" (46) by the early to mid-1940s, in the wake of recession and war. "The state could not, liberals were coming to believe, in any fundamental way 'solve' the problems of economy" (46). According to emergent views, the government should perform an essentially *compensatory* function, meaning that it "would redress weaknesses and imbalances in the private economy without directly confronting the internal workings of capitalism. Such a state could manage the economy without managing the institutions of the economy" (47).

According to Brinkley, James Landis's *The Administrative Process* (1938) is part and parcel of the "new vision of the state" (46) in formation during this period. From 1935-1937 Landis served as chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission; later, he would become dean of Harvard Law School. Landis wrote *The Administrative Process* to tell the story of a "new instrument of government" (1), what he calls the "administrative process," which he sees

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as arising from the "inadequacy of a simple tripartite form of government to deal with modern problems" (1). It is not so much the "modern problems" of government per se but rather the scope of problems for which government has become responsible that necessitates the added capacity provided by the administrative process. "Efficiency in the processes of governmental regulation" (24) has very much become the order of the day: "it is efficiency that is the desperate need" (24). Landis's meditation offers useful insight into the evolving "idea of the state" and other pertinent developments. Because administrative agencies do not belong to governmental bodies proper, and because they do not fall under the cumbersome statutes of law, the administrative process as a whole mediates between individuals and their government without the inefficiencies often associated with large bureaucratic (especially state) structures.[13] In Brinkley's assessment, the "concept of an administrative state that was gaining favor in the late New Deal, while rhetorically familiar, was substantively different from the visions that had attracted reformers even five years earlier" (45). As one can readily gather from Landis's remarks above, the administrative moment marks an initial attempt to imagine how other entities might pick up slack for a government no longer willing to tote all the burdens it had taken on. Anticipating the pluralism that would become widespread in American culture somewhat later in the fifties, Landis describes a constitutive element of the administrative process as involving the "breeding" of experts or "supermen to direct inordinately complex affairs of the larger branches of private industry" (25).

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[13] As Landis explains: the administrative processes "relative isolation from the popular democratic processes occasionally arouses the antagonism of legislators who themselves may wish to play a controlling part in some activity subject to its purview" (50).

It is tempting to call Superman's function in the early comics purely administrative. The superhero likewise mediates between government and common people, and his duties as mediator are rendered all the more manageable by the fact that he, like administrative agencies, occupies a liminal space not subject to cumbersome laws and bureaucratic red tape. Moreover, Landis explains how one of the greatest appeals of the administrative process lies in the way it affords "supermen" the opportunity to spearhead social and economic problems that cut across industries or sectors of the economy, and that for this reason escape the responsibility of any one governmental body. Superman shows himself capable of tackling a similar range of issues. Without blithely conflating Landis's "supermen" with Siegel and Shuster's Superman, we might highlight the extent to which Landis's account of the administrative process provides an instructive model for thinking about Superman's status in the early comics. Often enough, comics open with Superman either discovering or being confronted by a social-economic problem, which he then grapples with and resolves in a (efficient) manner not unlike the one Landis's supermen strive for.

That is just what happens when Superman decides to contend with the problem of reckless driving in the May 1939 comic. The speed with which an isolated incident of reckless driving becomes indicative of a city with "one of the worst traffic situations in the country" (154), as Clark Kent tells the city's mayor just one panel after discovering a victim of driver negligence, underscores the relative freedom Superman enjoys when it comes to elevating a given problem to a matter of priority. By the same token, the mayor's response to the incident—"It's really too bad," he tells Kent, "but—what can anyone do about it?" (154)—establishes a clear counterpoint to Superman, one that is subject to the legal procedures and red tape accompanying elected offices. Unlike the mayor and many officials working from within government proper, Siegel

and Shuster's superhero can circumnavigate some of the more cumbersome aspects of due process as well as combat problems that do not necessarily fall under the direct jurisdiction of any one government body. "I, for one, am going to do <u>plenty</u> about it!" (154) Superman decides in response to the mayor; then, in a radio announcement to the citizens of the city, he "declare[s] war on reckless drivers—henceforth, homicidal drivers answer to <u>me</u>!" (156) This comic is noteworthy because Siegel and Shuster use the term "one-man battle" (154) in the panel that always prefaces the body of each comic for the very first time, thus calling to mind Landis's insistence that citizens be able to pinpoint a specific party responsible for a given issue. In contrast to those who would later argue that the economic system had become too complex to assign responsibility, Landis goes to great lengths to give the public the option of "point[ing]" a finger "at a particular man or men [i.e., supermen] who are charged with the solution of a particular question" (28).[14] Superman is just this sort of "superman," and Landis certainly would have admired the administrative-like efficiency on display in this comic, especially since few branches of government would have been capable of leading a crusade against a problem like reckless driving in the first place. As if to confirm the efficacy of Superman's techniques, the comic ends with Clark Kent receiving a ticket from a traffic officer in a clear sign that both the mayor and the police are doing their jobs: hence Kent secretly rejoices while accepting the ticket from the officer (166).

Even as some of the superhero's tactics link him closely with the state—his radio announcement about reckless driving is eerily reminiscent of FDR's "fireside chats," which

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[14] For a notable example of the view that the economic system had become too complex to assign responsibility, see Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Vital Center*; see also my discussion of these issues in Chapter Three.

Siegel is known to have tuned into—other details suggest that Superman's statesmanship emanates from a location farther from the state than Landis's administrative model implies. Here we can cite Superman's beginnings (as opposed to *origins*), which are decidedly common. After his father saves him when his own planet, Krypton, is doomed to extinction, baby Superman is found by the Kents, a humble elderly couple "whose love and guidance," we are told, "was to become an important factor in the shaping of the boys future" (195). Initially, the Kents had turned baby Superman over to an orphan asylum, but they soon had a change of heart and decided to adopt him instead. His fate was thus to be raised not in a government-run orphan shelter, but in the home of the Kents, thanks to his adoptive parents' charity. And so, the spirit of charity that saved Superman from a government shelter is in due course instilled in him, except of course that whereas the Kents were moved by a sense of responsibility for a lone baby, Superman will carry responsibility for all of the oppressed and needy. In this way, the upbringing he receives at the hands of the Kents plainly establishes his grass-roots beginnings, even though his super-human powers—not to mention his dual outsider status, as both an extraterrestrial and, in the guise of Clark Kent, a Jew—distinguish him from the Kents and everyone else.

Perhaps the most succinct illustration of the nature of the aid Superman renders comes in the January 1939 issue. The story commences with the proceedings of a juvenile court. Clark Kent observes as an adolescent, Frankie, is convicted for assault and battery; also in court is Frankie's mother, who pleas with the judge on her son's behalf, saying, "Of course, he talks tough—what's more he is tough, your honor—but he's only like all the other boys in our neighborhood…hard resentful, underprivileged. He's my only son, sir he might have been a good boy except for his environment. He still might be—if you'll be merciful!" (98) Clark finds

the noticeably aged, dismal woman's plea compelling. After further investigation Superman

discovers how Frankie fell victim to the sinister designs of a small-time thug named Gimpy, who

lures boys into carrying out his criminal plans and promises them protection in the event they are

caught. The way Gympy's racket works is he refuses to pay the boys all of what he owes them

and then arranges for their capture by police as soon as they demand payment. Now that

Frankie's comrades are raising a fuss over their friend's recent betrayal and requesting payment

for their services, the small-time crime boss sends them on a job robbing houses as a ploy to

have them picked up by the police, whom he has alerted of the crimes in progress. Before the

police can catch them, Superman rescues the youth and quickly takes to reforming them.

"You've plenty nerve!" Superman reasons with them, "too bad you can't turn it into constructive

channels!" (108) Superman continues: "It's not entirely your fault that you're delinquent—it's

these slums—your poor living conditions—if there was only some way I could remedy it—!"

(108) Like Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and many other characters in

socially-minded literature of the period, the boys are cast as victims of environment.

They are also, it turns out, victims of the state's reluctance to perform its duties before

residents of slums like the one in which they live. Siegel and Shuster convey this point through

the course of action that Superman decides to take next. Superman finds inspiration for how to

help residents of the slum after reading in a newspaper about the government's response to a

cyclone that has hit Florida: the government, Superman learns, rushed aid into the region and

erected modern housing projects for victims of the disaster. His plan involves inducing the state

to do the same for victims of slums as it does for victims of cyclones. Thus, having first

evacuated all residents, Superman demolishes the slum so that it appears as if a cyclone has hit

this region as well. "So the government rebuilds destroyed areas with modern cheap-rental

apartments, eh?" Superman remarks as he destroys a dilapidated house. "Then here's a job for it!" (109) He gets himself into trouble with local authorities for his drastic methods but in the end achieves his aim, as the "slums are replaced by splendid housing conditions" (110)—not, however, before Superman forces government action.

Nor must we give Superman more credit than is due. For while it is true that he comes up with a solution to the problem of this slum ("I've got it!" [109] he says while reading about government aid for cyclone victims in the paper), the solution itself paradoxically reveals the extent to which Superman, even with his super-human powers, is not really up to the task of resolving problems like these at all. Rather, the best he can do is merely to act as a catalyst for the government to solve the problem. He fulfills a notably administrative function in the sense that he negotiates between government and citizens; ensures the efficient functioning of government; and, at least from one angle, prescribes government intervention. On the one hand, the January 1939 comic can therefore be said to echo calls from this period for an aggressive form of statism that, though no longer aimed at solving inherent structural problems in capitalism itself, as Brinkley notes, emphasized the need for constant government intervention. The state should not just provide disaster relief, Siegel and Shuster suggest in this episode, but it ought to offer more comprehensive assistance to poverty-stricken neighborhoods like the slum depicted here. That the only conceivable solution for a superhero in this situation is to induce government to fix the problem speaks volumes about Superman's status in the early comics. Like Landis's "supermen," Superman helps the state meet the demands of an increasingly complex economic system in an efficient manner. On the other hand, however, the mere fact the slums exist in the first place indicates the ineffectiveness of actual statist practices, and from this perspective the figure of the superhero bespeaks the need for supermen and statesmen to compensate for the

diminishing role of government. Seen from this perspective, Superman poses as a harbinger for future statesmen.

 "'The Man Who Lived Underground': An Oppressed Statesman?"
The Man in Wright's story is a logical extension of Superman. If the latter represents an attempt to imagine how the locus of responsibility moves away from the state, particularly through the administrative process, the former brings this idea to its most radical conclusion. After all, the Man is not an extraterrestrial with impressive superhuman powers, nor does he occupy a privileged space between government and citizens; he belongs to an oppressed racial minority and is, for all intents and purposes, in desperate need of help himself. Nevertheless, Wright depicts his protagonist emerging from the underground at the story's conclusion as a messiah figure—appropriately singing "I got Jesus in my Soul" (88)—who takes on responsibility for spreading the message of his underground revelations. He has been prepared, of course, for this role by his experiences underground, where he stumbles upon numerous people in need of help and in each instance experiences an almost irresistible impulse to render whatever services he can offer. The Man even implicitly acknowledges how beneficial it would be if he could summon superhuman powers to better assist people by imagining himself walking on air (38) and walking on water (42) in successive scenes. But clearly, the dynamics of statesmanship found in Wright's novella situate the text in a new stage of the evolving "idea of the state."

While "The Man Who Lived Underground" receives far less critical attention than some of the author's other works, it has generated dubiety and sometimes mystification for critics who have ventured readings thus far. The gamut of interpretations put forth suggests this much. Most readers emphasize the text's existential motifs in connection with Wright's by now familiar

transition, as Max Eastman once put it, "from the Communist conspiracy to the Existentialist racket" (46). Then again, Patricia Watkins wants us to preserve the story's naturalistic *and* existential elements. I will contend along with most readers that the novella stands at a pivotal point in Wright's oeuvre and negotiates important aspects of his evolving artistic and political allegiances. Several critics proffer hypotheses as to the text's allegorical meanings, and here also one discovers a range of views. Robin McNallie advances the view that the underground should be read as an allegory for Plato's cave in *The Republic*. Patricia Watkins, despite her desire to preserve the naturalistic and existential elements in equal measure, likens Daniels to Christ or to a god in the existentialist tradition, as exemplified by Jean-Paul Sartre's "existential dictum 'Create yourself and your world'" (151). More recently, Jeffrey Clapp reads the novella as a chapter in Wright's career of an extended narrative on confessional speech in American legal and literary culture.[15]

Although McCann and Szalay have discussed Wright's work in the context of New Deal culture, neither critic so much as mentions "The Man Who Lived Underground." Focusing their analyses primarily on *Native Son* (1940) and *The Outsider* (1953), McCann and Szalay conclude that Wright's relationship with the New Deal was an "ambivalent" (McCann 199) one. As a beneficiary of New Deal relief and a member of a racial minority, the author at once appreciated the government wage he received through the WPA's Writers' Projects in Chicago and understood how, as Szalay puts it, "the New Deal remained in many ways fundamentally racist and hostile toward Blacks" (213). McCann and Szalay see this "ambivalence" as extending

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[15] See, in order, Patricia Watkins's "The Paradoxical Structure of Richard Wright's 'The Man Who Lived Underground'"; Robin McNallie's "Richard Wright's Allegory of the Cave: 'The Man Who Lived Underground'"; Jeffrey Clapp's "Richard Wright and the Police."

throughout Wright's work and make little allowance for the possibility that his views underwent changes of any kind. "The Man Who Lived Underground" problematizes this assessment, suggesting that he at the very least experimented for a time with popular antistatist sentiments in circulation during this era. In terms of its politics and its aesthetics, the novella marks a significant departure from Wright's previous work and ought to be read against the backdrop of contemporaneous political developments, as the author's alleged personal "ambivalence" toward the New Deal tends to take a backseat to his tacit endorsement of widespread antistatist sentiments.

The state we find in the story has been stripped of all potential for providing relief, aid, and help and reduced to its punitive functions. In having the police stand as a metonym for the state, Wright evokes the idea of an oppressive police state, and in this regard his portrayal reflects the rising wartime fear, noted by historian Benjamin Alpers, that authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and other forms of oppression are inevitable outcomes of an "all-powerful state" (Alpers 252). Daniels's initial retreat underground is therefore an act of pure necessity caused by the threat of additional police-state violence, but it initiates a process of self-discovery and transcendence that emancipates him—at least partially—from the terms of his oppression. The text's preoccupation with freedom and emancipation anticipates, as numerous critics have pointed out, the subsequent rise of existentialism; perhaps more importantly, however, the prominence of these themes invokes an array of historical equivalents whereby the subject was seen as having gained freedom from formerly oppressive forces, including those of the state. Influential works published around this time, such as John Dewey's *Freedom and Democracy* (1939), R. A. Ansher's *Freedom, Its Meaning* (1940), and Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941), provide good starting points of reference. They also confirm the extent to which this

narrative was animated by the rise of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes abroad, and by the view that a strong managerial state would likely give rise to similar regimes at home as well. Only the looming specter of totalitarianism in Europe can explain grand statements to the effect that, as Fromm put it, "modern European and American history is centered around the effort to gain freedom from the political, economic, and spiritual shackles that have bound men" (1). The Man's abrupt transition from oppression to freedom—his *emancipation*, such as it is—would have called these issues to mind.

Noticeably concerned not so much with race relations as in his earlier *Native Son*, Wright aspires to appeal in this work to the widest possible audience. Even his use of black motifs and signifiers points to a broader political frame of reference rather than a strictly racial one. Commenting on Nelson Algren's *Never Come Morning* around the time he was composing "The Man Who Lived Underground," Wright speaks in terms vaguely resembling Fromm's cited above, and in so doing, he manages to denude even *Native Son* of its racial concerns:

> If I were asked what is the one, over-all symbol or image gained from my living that most nearly represents what I feel to be the essence of American life, I'd say that it was that of a man struggling mightily to free his personality from the daily and hourly encroachments of American life. Of course, *Native Son* is but one angle of what I feel to be the struggle of the individual in America for self-possession. (Fabre 243)

"The Man Who Lived Underground" obviously pursues yet another "angle" of the struggle for self-possession, just as it takes this struggle to a whole new level. In abandoning many of the racial concerns that had preoccupied him in *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and *Native Son*, Wright turns his attention to universal forms of human oppression, and so his warnings against

the "encroachments of American life" acquire an antistatist valence. Biographer Michel Fabre

reports that Wright himself conceptualized the novella as "the first time [he] really tried to step

beyond the straight black-white stuff" (240). In some sense, the "step beyond" racial "stuff"

takes place within the work itself, for while Daniels flees police custody in order to escape racial

oppression in the beginning, subsequent (underground) revelations render earlier racial concerns

minor in comparison with his newfound universalism.

Hence the inveterate issue of African American mistreatment at the doorstep of law

enforcement, which Daniels's abuse at first calls to mind, gives way to the issue of state

oppression in general. This is especially true when the Man witnesses an innocent boy and

watchman, neither of whose race is explicitly mentioned, being beaten for crimes they did not

commit by the same policemen who tortured Daniels.[16] It is almost as if Wright evokes the long

history of fear and dread that blacks have with good cause felt toward the police and the law

more generally so as to sound alarms about the dangers of statism. By the time he emerges from

the underground, the Man has jettisoned not only his identity as a member of an oppressed racial

minority but whatever other identity he had as well—he does not even remember his name. Now

depicted as a sort of everyman, Wright's character transforms before the reader's eyes from a

symbol of racial oppression to a symbol of the quest for the emancipation of the subject. The

underground importantly enables this quest and thus becomes a symbol of a world existing

outside the pale of statist oppression; created at one point by the state but since neglected and

forgotten, the underground stands far-removed from the aboveground world. For this reason,

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[16] The fact that Wright doesn't mention the race of the watchman is particularly revealing since there is a

moment when Daniels is seen staring into the face of the watchman "so close that it made him want to

bound up and scream" (57).

Daniels feels as though in retreating underground he had "traveled a million miles away from the world" (31).

The freedom and power that the Man believes himself to come in possession of while underground rivals even Superman's. Though he never dons a cape and tights in superhero fashion, his transformation from beginning to end is equally complete and almost as abrupt. The opening line, "I've got to hide, he told himself" (27), indicates Daniels's recognition of the extent that external forces dominate his existence. One can surmise, furthermore, that this is an individual who is likely accustomed to impositions made by the external world, since the command to hide issues forth from Daniels to himself ("he told himself"). At least for now, he is akin to Bigger Thomas before the murder of Mary Dalton. His retreat underground initially involves little more than the displacement of one set of concerns for another; in the underground sewer, the "leaping" (28), "pulsing" (29), "streaking" (29), "rustling" (29), "pouring" (29), "plung[ing]" (29), and "spewing" (30) water threatens to engulf him and thus takes the place of the hostile environment he had experienced aboveground. Daniels is also attuned to the demands that his physical existence makes on him, as he spends much of his time early on struggling to satisfy bodily needs, especially the need for food and nutrition. In one scene, he steals a worker's lunchbox with sandwiches (40); in another, he sneaks into a grocery store, eating all the fruits he can "until his stomach felt about to burst" and he felt "satisfied for the first time since he had been underground" (47). Patricia Watkins reads the deterministic and the existential trajectories of the novella as signs of its "paradoxical structure" (148), its "contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable parts" (148), which are reducible to the naturalist tradition from which Wright often drew and the existentialist vogue the novella anticipates. This reading, however, misses the way the former gives way to the latter. To the extent that he immerses himself in the

underground (something Wright signals when he explains how the "odor of rot had become so general that he no longer smelled it" [29]) and gleans lessons from the scenes of daily life he observes, the Man transcends the oppressive forces that had dominated his life, becoming a sort of underground superman.

As he overcomes in quick succession bodily needs—particularly hunger and thirst, which become less and less of a concern—and the raw forces that threaten him in the underground, his attention turns to increasingly cosmic matters. In an epiphany occurring right after he secures a safe filled with money, diamonds, and jewelry (which he dubiously claims he has not stolen), Daniels discovers that he is capable of considering these newly acquired objects with indifference to the "pleasure[s]" (53) usually associated with them aboveground. His admiration for the objects is devoid of worldly feeling, and this allows for a more profound relation to the things themselves, a feat which for him constitutes a "triumph[…] over the world aboveground" (62). Listening to a radio broadcast, Daniels views the diamonds sprawled out on the floor of his underground liar and imagines them to be, first, a "sprawling city" (65) and, second, a battlefield over which he hovers and eavesdrops as the "names of generals and the names of mountains and the names of countries and the names and numbers of divisions that were in action on different battle fronts" (65) sounded below him. This series of out-of-body experiences climaxes on the next page when Daniels dreams he is "standing in a room watching over his own nude body lying stiff and cold upon a white table" (66). For the first time, Daniels occupies a position of power in relation to the world: as he surmises in this vision, the people surrounding his body were "scared" (66) of him. Daniels is now the Man.

The Man's emergence is virtually coextensive with what Erich Fromm and others have described as the rise of the modern subject. In triumphing over the world, the Man realizes that

"he [is] free!" (62); however, this freedom comes at a cost: as he discovers in this same moment,

his new thoughts make him feel "vaguely guilty" (64). One could refer to any number of

thinkers who have theorized almost identical developments in modern selfhood, but Fromm

seems appropriate since *Escape from Freedom* appeared around this time. Fromm argues that as

the subject overcomes the external restraints which have determined his existence until recently

(most crucially, those of the "Church and the State" [105]), he will experience feelings of

"aloneness" (28) and "anxiety" (29), two essential characteristics of modern subjectivity. Thus,

although "emancipation" or "freedom from" (34) traditional sources of oppression is a positive

development, Fromm insists that this process not be seen as distinct from new forms of

oppression rising in place of old ones. Some of the new forms of oppression include internal

restraints such as "aloneness," "anxiety," and "conscience" (5). "Our aim will be to show that

the structure of modern society affects man in two ways simultaneously: he becomes more

independent, self-reliant, and critical, and he becomes more isolated, alone, and afraid" (104),

writes Fromm. He continues: "We fail sufficiently to recognize…that although man has rid

himself from old enemies of freedom, new enemies of a different nature have arisen" (104-105).

The underground introduces Daniels to these "new enemies," and so it is no coincidence that he

feels "alone" (31) for the first time right after entering the underground; on at least two other

occasions as well, he is confronted by the disquieting reality that "he was alone" (40, 43).

That Daniels, who begins as a symbol of a particular history of *racial* oppression, comes

to represent a struggle against distinctly universal forms of oppression may appear contradictory

on first glance, but thinkers like Étienne Balibar suggest otherwise. As Balibar has noted, the

term *subject* has little meaning except when we include under this category the concept of the

"citizen," which of course includes "the history of politics and political thought" (7). The citizen

"may become symbolically universalized and sublimated," Balibar explains, "but never ceases to refer to a very precise *history*, where it is a question of progress, conflict, emancipation and revolutions" (7). The particular history of racial oppression in America remains implicit in the Man's emancipation, even as his struggle simultaneously evokes the emancipation of the subject more generally. It is precisely in this way that Wright's protagonist negotiates the dual meaning of the term "subject." Balibar writes: "The very *name* which allows modern philosophy to think and designate the *originary freedom* of the human being—the name of 'subject'—is precisely the name which *historically* meant suppression of freedom, or at least an intrinsic limitation of freedom, i.e. *subjection*" (8).

Balibar's insight into the dual meaning of the term subject and Fromm's warning about the pitfalls of transitioning from an earlier problematic of "freedom from" to a modern problematic of "freedom to" are particularly edifying in the context of Wright's novella. While the Man makes noteworthy achievements in the realm of "freedom from," he straddles a fine line between realizing his newfound freedom and unwittingly falling victim to new, largely indecipherable forms of oppression. As Fromm emphasizes, achieving "freedom from" does not guarantee realization of "freedom to"; on the contrary, the modern subject is afraid of the sense of aloneness accompanying his escape from shackles of old, and this fear frequently stands as a roadblock to realizing his full potential. According to Fromm, the challenges that come with transitioning to a politics of "freedom to" explain the appeal of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. "Impulses arise to give up one's individuality," Fromm writes, "to overcome the feeling of aloneness and powerlessness by completely submerging oneself in the world outside" (29). It is clear at this point that Fromm's attention is turned primarily to Europe rather than to America, because in the latter these new forms of oppression (corresponding with the

"freedom to" problematic) manifest themselves in different ways. In both the early Superman comics and "The Man Who Lived Underground" a breakdown occurs in the realization of freedoms on account not of a desire to lose the self in authoritarian power but of the imperative to sacrifice oneself for the well-being of others. For Superman and the Man "freedom to" points invariably to the need for them to cast themselves as responsible for others; especially in the case of Wright's character, the burdens he assumes in this way cripple his own development and ultimately result in his death.

This oversight on the part of Fromm regarding other possible effects of an unsuccessful transition to a "freedom to" problematic leads him to misjudge "masochism" and "sadism," or what he explains are constitutive elements of modern subjectivity. Skeptical of any displays of concern for others, Fromm asserts that "overgoodness" and "overconcern" (143) are really just ruses used to cover up the actually sadistic desire to dominate and control objects of one's self-serving overconcern. What Fromm fails to realize is not just that concern for others does not always point to masochistic tendencies but that even seemingly masochistic tendencies can arise from the selfless desire to bear excessive burdens for others when the state is either unwilling or unable to do so. Certainly, Fromm's insistence on the centrality of sadism could hardly be further from the truth in the case of Superman or the Man. Even as Superman and the Man are aware of their powers and at times revel in them, they always abnegate potential benefits of their powers and thus demonstrate themselves capable of sacrificing for others without any sadistic motives.

From Fromm's perspective, the Man's refusal to act in separate scenes as an innocent boy and night watchman are punished—for crimes that the Man had committed no less—must be chalked up to an incipient sadism. As closer inspection reveals, however, there is more at stake

here than meets the eye. We might begin by pointing out that this is not the first time the Man has elected not to help others. Not long after retreating underground, Daniels decides against helping movie goers who are unable to understand how, in being amused by "jerking shadows" on the "screen of silver" (38), they are "laughing at their lives" (38); the movie goers, Daniels's surmises, "were shouting and yelling at the animated shadows of themselves" (38). "Seized" initially by an impulse to help, Daniels's "compassion fired his imagination and he stepped out of the box, walked out upon thin air, walked on down to the audience; and, hovering in the air just above them, he stretched out his hand to touch them…His tension snapped and he found himself back in the box, looking down into the sea of faces. No; it could not be done; he could not awaken them" (38). Never mind the fact that just several pages earlier Daniels was in desperate need of help himself; nevertheless, he wants to help others. It is not because he does not wish to help that he elects in the end against rendering aid. Rather, it is because he realizes that any help he might provide would be in vain: "it could not be done; he could not awaken them." He learns a similar lesson from his failed attempt to rescue a drowning woman and her baby in a dream that takes place right after his visit to the theater. Like in the movie theater, Daniels finds himself "walking upon the water" (42) in the attempt to save the woman and baby. Alas, the superhuman powers he has acquired in walking on air and water do not change the outcome of his attempts to render aid, as the dream ends with his losing both the woman and her baby. No longer able to walk on water, he is forced to yell for help himself.

The Man's decision not to assist the boy and the watchman should be read in the context of these previous lessons regarding the futility of help. Once again, he reasons that although returning the radio to its place might curtail the boy's abuse, it will not significantly alter his condition. "No. Perhaps it was a good thing that they were beating the boy," he thinks, "perhaps

the beating would bring to the boy's attention, for the first time in his life, the secret of his existence, the guilt that he could never get rid of" (69). His rationale for not helping the watchman a moment later follows a similar logic: "No…What good would that do? It was not worth the effort. The watchman was guilty; although he was not guilty of the crime of which he had been accused, he was guilty, had always been guilty" (70). Far from being part of a sadistic scheme, the reason the Man does not come to the aid of the boy and the watchman—and the movie goers—has to do with how his underground revelations have confirmed truths not only about his own existence but about others' as well. To render aid is a losing cause since the Man has by now accepted the idea that others carry responsibility for their condition just as he does. Again, by neglecting to mention the race of either the boy or the watchman, Wright underscores the extent to which his character's realizations about himself—namely, that he is "free" and "guilty"—extend to a broader populace. While neither the boy nor the watchman nor Daniels is guilty of crimes leveled against them, they all must assume responsibility for human failures in general. The lesson they are thus meant to learn in this moment is identical with a view which enjoyed wide circulation in the 1940s and 1950s and which held that everyone bears responsibility for his or her condition.[17] The Man accepts this idea of general responsibility as a sort of counterproposition to his own statesmanship because both ideas arise from one and the same source: the diminished role of the state.

It is no coincidence that the Man's epiphany here enables him to return aboveground so as to realize the new project of ensuring that "everybody would be governed by the same impulse of pity" (89). *Pity* is the slogan of the Man's statesmanship. As can be readily discerned, the

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[17] See, most notably, Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and Leslie Fiedler's *An End to Innocence: Essays on Culture and Politics*.

Man's statesmanship pales in comparison to Superman's, both in terms of scope and aim. Even though the Man's aspirations come close to those of a superhero when he imagines himself walking on air to awaken the movie goers or walking on water to save the drowning woman, subsequent events demonstrate the extent to which he must diminish his expectations on this account. When Superman understands that he is incapable of solving the problem of the slums, he forces the federal government's hand and it solved the problem; whereas for the Man this is clearly not a viable option, and so he must refine his notion of what it means to *help* others. *Pity* thus stands for a modest form of statesmanship that conforms to changing realities in that it no longer strives to alter others' condition in a fundamental sense.

Chapter 3

Underground Poetics: Ex-Communists, the Legacy of the Underground Man, and the Guilty

Conscience in American Literature

"Dostoevsky has penetrated more deeply than Tolstoy into the fabric of contemporary thought.

He is one of the principle masters of modern sensibility"—George Steiner, *Tolstoy or*

Dostoevsky

"It is one of the ironies of our times that the hunt for 'subversive elements' in American

universities should occur at the moment when the radical prophets are in intellectual disrepute

and Dostoevsky carries more weight with undergraduates than Karl Marx"—Daniel Aaron,

"Conservatism, Old and New"

"On Reading Dostoevsky in America"

There is a moment in Book Three of Richard Wright's *Native Son* when Bigger Thomas falls

into a state of utter apathy and despair after being incarcerated for the murder of Mary Dalton.

"Food was brought to him upon trays," Wright explains, "and an hour later the trays were taken

away, untouched. They gave him packages of cigarettes, but they lay on the floor, unopened.

He would not even drink water. He simply lay or sat, saying nothing, not noticing when anyone

entered or left his cell" (273). For the first time in his life, Bigger does not fear or hate anyone

because he knows that fear and hate are "useless" (273). In just this one scene in the novel, he

has the impulse to transcend the social and the historical in favor of a timeless, eternal resting place:

> With a supreme act of will springing from the essence of his being, he turned away from his life and the long train of disastrous consequences that had flowed from it and looked wistfully upon the dark face of ancient waters upon which some spirit had breathed and created him, the dark face of the waters from which he had been first made in the image of a man with a man's obscure need and urge; feeling that he wanted to sink back into those waters and rest eternally. (274)

With his intent to disavow "life and the long train of disastrous consequences that had flowed from it," Bigger contemplates abandoning the social and the historical perspective—what Wright also called the "world-picture"[18]—based on which he otherwise so insistently judges himself and the world. Significantly, his ruminating on a time when he was made "in the image of man with man's obscure need and urge" invokes Genesis and the Fall and foreshadows Reverend Hammond's reading of it less than ten pages later. This should not, however, be mistaken for an attempt to revive a lost innocence: in mentioning "man's obscure need and urge," Wright evokes a post-innocent stage of human existence. And so the phrase, to "rest eternally" in "those waters," symbolizes Bigger's desire to dwell in a state of guilt and self-loathing, a

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[18] Wright frequently discussed this sort of perspective and the formative influence it had on his own work during this period. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born" he explains how his time in the Communist Party made him aware of the "concrete picture and the abstract linkages of relationships" (442) in his world. Similarly, in a 1938 interview he once described the "new realism" of leftist writers and the "world-picture" to which it invariably pointed, where that picture was characterized by a perspective that bears a close resemblance to Bigger's at key moments. For more on this, see *Conversations with Richard Wright* 13.

scene that will be staged in American literature with increasing frequency for at least the next two decades.

Although Wright was still a member of the Communist Party at the time of *Native Son*'s publication, signs of the incipient doubt that eventually led to his break with the Party in 1942 can be detected in this anomalous scene. And the scene is absolutely anomalous: strange as this may sound apropos of Bigger Thomas, he comes close to assuming a guilty posture in the manner of an ex-Communist, the figure of which we will examine more closely in what follows. Had he not, therefore, dragged himself out of this state after being confronted by his accusers in court, then it goes without saying that the ending of *Native Son* would have been markedly different. Based on the tradition of ex-Communist confession and political apostasy which became so prevalent in the decade and a half after Wright wrote his seminal novel, we might only imagine that there would have been more lines like the following, taken from this same scene:

> Out of the mood of renunciation there sprang up in him again the will to kill. But this time it was not directed outward toward people, but inward, upon himself. Why not kill that wayward yearning within him that had led him to this end? He had reached out and killed and had not solved anything, so why not reach inward and kill that which had duped him? (274)

This passage stands in sharp contrast to Bigger's emphatic confirmation of self on the novel's concluding pages (in often-cited words to his lawyer Bigger says, "What I killed for, I am" [429]) and underscores how easily he might have gone down a different path. His gesture of turning "inward, upon himself," together with the idea of somehow having been "duped," bear an unmistakable resemblance to the turbulent set of emotions described by countless former

leftists upon breaking with the Party.[19] Wright's depiction here anticipates later enactments of

the by-now-familiar scene when the cold and unwavering self-assuredness—also apt descriptors

of Bigger at one point or another—of the Communist morphs into the self-loathing and guilt

often associated with what Sidney Hook has described as the "traumatic shock" (262) of

breaking with the left. A topic of fascination for many intellectuals in midcentury America, who

devoted articles and forums to issues such as "The Problem of the Ex-Communist," this moment

of existential crisis resulting from political apostasy would come to be known as "Kronstadt."[20]

Even though Bigger never belonged to the Party, the description of his failed attempt to reach out

and change the world and of how he re-channels this energy against himself out of despair

echoes testimony given by ex-radicals.

At the same time, this brief episode in *Native Son* draws language and imagery from the

work of Russian author Fyoder Dostoevsky. The gamut of emotions Bigger experiences in this

short span of time harks back to sentiments that Dostoevsky's infamous narrator in *Notes from

Underground* (1864) so painstakingly describes. Like the Underground Man, Bigger has the

unmistakable impulse to turn inward and to discharge energy on his self that he would prefer to

expend on the world. In both instances, self-loathing fulfills the self's need to rid itself of

cathartic energy in the absence of external outlets. Bigger's existential state and Wright's novel

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[19] In *Witness*, Whittaker Chambers speaks of ex-Communists as feeling like "dupe[s]" (13). For a more

general account of the experiences of ex-Communists, see Sidney Hook's "The Literature of Political

Disillusionment" and "The Problem of the Ex-Communist," in *Political Power and Personal Freedom:

Critical Studies in Democracy, Communism, and Civil Rights*.

[20] The term was taken from the unsuccessful uprising against the Bolsheviks in 1921 that originated in

Kronstadt, a naval post on Kotlin Island. It was later made famous in U.S. intellectual circles by Louis

Fischer in his contribution to Richard Crossman's *The God That Failed*.

flirt in this moment with entering an "underground poetics," a designation I will use for a discursive tradition that has been attributed, albeit problematically, to Dostoevsky and mimicked by countless others. What stands out in this tradition, and in this scene from Wright's novel, is the way in which the external world recedes as the lone guilty conscience is celebrated as something like the be-all and end-all of conscious existence.

The point to be made is that this scene in *Native Son* combines the trappings of political apostasy and underground poetics. The intersection of these discourses in this way—even as they work against the broader message of the novel, which is otherwise careful not to associate Bigger with feelings of guilt or responsibility—foreshadows a preoccupation with guilt and the guilty conscience in later Wright fiction, "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1944), *The Outsider* (1953), and *Savage Holiday* (1954), as well as in American literature and culture more generally. Although the history of ex-Communist confession has shaped modern sensibility in a profound way, it remains an understudied topic, and so it is worth remembering some of the salient moments. Throughout the 1940s and the 1950s, political confessions crop up with striking frequency. Victor Kravchenko's *I Chose Freedom* (1946), Louis Budenz's *This is My Story* (1947), Freda Utley's *Lost Illusion* (1948), Richard Crossman's anthology *The God That Failed* (1949), Elizabeth Bentley's *Out of Bondage* (1951), and Whittaker Chamber's *Witness* (1952) occupied a central place in popular discourse and set the tone for confessions before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in the 1950s.

As might only be expected, this notoriously public discourse (the Alger-Hiss case being a prime example) borrowed from and contributed to literary production. The list of literary works from this period that were concerned with issues of guilt, repentance, and disillusionment among current or, more frequently, former radicals includes, among others: Saul Bellow's *Dangling*

Man (1944), Eleanor Clark's *The Bitter Box* (1946), Lionel Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey*

(1947), Chester Himes's *Lonely Crusade* (1947), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949),

Norman Mailer's *Barbary Shore* (1951), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Richard

Wright's *The Outsider* (1953). The confluence of this simultaneously political and literary

discourse marks a turn in American culture that would contribute to a celebration of the guilty

conscience in the work of authors who had little or no direct relation to the history of radicalism.

J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) stands as perhaps the most obvious example, and

so I will discuss it in more detail below.

Barbara Foley has made significant inroads in elucidating the political dynamics at work

in ex-Communist confessions, as have some literary historians of the so-called New York

Intellectuals. In general, it is nevertheless true that this material has not received nearly enough

attention from literary critics, and so it is little surprise that we have overlooked the extent to

which both ex-radical confession and the celebration of the guilty conscience were informed by a

sustained engagement with the work of Dostoevsky by ex-Communists. In examining two of the

most influential works from the genre of ex-radical apostasy, Eugene Lyons's *Assignment in

Utopia* (1938) and Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940), I will demonstrate how these

texts borrow language, motifs, and basic assumptions from a highly tendentious reading of

Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*.

"A 'Politics of Salvation'?"

In a 1960 *Partisan Review* article entitled "Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*," Philip Rahv

considers Dostoevsky's allusions to Raskolnikov's future redemption in the final moments of

Crime and Punishment (1866). Dostoevsky describes how Raskolnikov picks up a copy of the

New Testament which Sonya, a fallen prostitute whom he has rescued, gave him on his own request. The novel concludes with the following lines: "But that is the beginning of a new story, the story of the gradual renewal of a man, of his gradual regeneration, of his slow progress from one world to another, of how he learned to know a hitherto undreamed-of reality. All that might be the subject of a new tale, but our present one is ended" (465). Rahv notes in passing that Raskolnikov "remains essentially unrepentant to the end" (550), and then, in a conspicuously laconic passage on Raskolnikov's eventual "regeneration," he writes: "we, as critical readers, cannot overmuch concern ourselves with such intimations of ultimate reconcilement and salvation. Our proper concern is with the present story, with the story as written" (550-551).

In part, of course, Rahv has in mind the liberties he feels a literary critic can or cannot take with a text. Dostoevsky intimates future salvation but also explicitly states that the question of salvation does not fall under the purview of the novel; for Rahv and many other conscientious critics, this detail renders speculation on account of Raskolnikov's salvation seem reckless, perhaps even audacious. Such questions aside, however, it is difficult to imagine that Rahv would have deemed it necessary to make so patently obvious a statement if not for the political turmoil of the previous decade and a half. With McCarthyism in the rearview mirror by 1960, Rahv's remarks suggest that the culture of ex-radical confession which had occupied such a visible place in American culture, and which had featured frequent allusions to "reconcilement" and "salvation," was only now beginning to take a back seat to other issues. And yet, the legacy of that culture persists, as seen in the mere fact that Rahv calls attention to the perils of speculating on Raskolnikov's future "salvation," which stands out now as rather contrived—not least of all because it is so plainly obvious.

If one recalls Irving Howe's influential "Dostoevsky: The Politics of Salvation," which first appeared precisely five years earlier in *The Kenyan Review*, it becomes plain that the theme of "salvation" in the Russian author's work had not always been of little "concern" to American readers. Howe's discussion of "salvation" centers on Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (1872), one of the earliest, most widely-read anti-Communist novels and the most extended rumination in the author's oeuvre on what were, to his mind, the wicked underlying intentions of nineteenth-century progressives (to whose ranks Dostoevsky once belonged). There can be little question, therefore, as to the existence of a political dimension to Howe's focus on this particular text at this particular time in American history. The more pressing concern for us here is the way in which neither Howe nor Rahv shows signs of recognizing a connection between their own attention to "salvation" in Dostoevsky and the attention that ex-radicals had been paying to this same theme in the author's work for quite some time.

This is not a matter of ignorance on the part of these brilliant critics. We know this based on previous writings of theirs, in which they make the connections they seem wont to elide in the instances mentioned above. In a 1952 *Partisan Review* article "The Sense and Nonsense of Whittaker Chambers," a younger Philip Rahv opens his musings on the most famous—even infamous—ex-Communist with the following lines: "What chiefly caught my interest when I first encountered Whittaker Chambers…was something in his talk and manner, a vibration, an accent, that I can only describe as Dosteovskyean in essence" (317). Irving Howe similarly concluded that, "What Chambers really yearned for was to discard his soiled American self and appear—reincarnate, in ascetic leanness—as a twentieth-century Dostoevsky" (264). To the list of fictional works listed above that feature ex-Communists, one might add a work like Mary McCarthy's *Groves of the Academe* (1951), whose Henry Mulcahy, a college professor and

former radical sympathizer, poses as an ex-Communist and thus victim of the Red Scare in an attempt to salvage his job, which he has in fact lost for personal reasons. Notwithstanding the dubious departures the novel makes from the quintessential ex-Communist narrative—who would claim to have been a Communist when they actually were not during the Red Scare?—McCarthy's work concerns itself with analogous themes, guilt, salvation, and so on. Not surprisingly, the novel also makes an implicit link on several occasions between Dostoevsky and ex-Communists: for instance, the novel's ex-Communist poser, Mulcahy, cites famous passages from *Notes from Underground*, including the Underground Man's "two plus two making five" (54). In another moment, when Mulcahy manages to convince a colleague named Domna—who happens to be a young Russian woman—of his ex-Communist credentials, Domna experiences a moment of "instant *recognition*," picturing him in this instant "as the embodiment of a universal, the eidos, as it were, of the Communist, Lazarus to their Dives, the underground man appointed to rise from the mold and confront society in his cerements" (97). All of which to say is that the assumed affinity between ex-radicals and Dostoevsky characters did not go unnoticed.

Rahv's and Howe's failure to mention the political context of their attention to "salvation" in Dostoevsky has much to do, rather, with their tacit acceptance of the view that they are somehow above the ideological divisions that had vexed their colleagues and themselves for the past three decades. Daniel Bell's *The End of Ideology* (1960) and Daniel Boorstin's *The Genius of American Politics* (1953) stand as a testament to the broad appeal of this view among intellectual circles during this era. As a result of this reluctance to consider the political dimensions of reading Dostoevsky in American, critics like Rahv and Howe have underestimated for some time now the extent to which early engagements with Dostoevsky by ex-radicals have shaped the way intellectuals read the Russian author's work. Time and again in midcentury

America, writers and critics focus myopically on a thread of Dostoevsky's work that falls roughly under the category of what Irving Howe called "the politics of salvation." We saw this in our discussion of Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" in the previous chapter; the novella emphatically associates the "underground" aspect of Daniels's experience with his inescapable feelings of guilt. The frequency of these readings has made it customary for others to read these themes across all Dostoevsky's works, imbuing them with a sort of repentant politics.

It is staggering, for instance, how many commentators of *Crime and Punishment* assume that Raskolnikov feels guilty for his crimes and that he repents for them. Let us recall what Dostoevsky actually says. In the second epilogue, mere pages before the end of the novel, he writes: "How happy he would have been if he could have put the blame on himself!…But although he judged himself severely, his lively conscience could find no particularly terrible guilt in his past, except a simple blunder, that might have happened to anybody" (458). As if to make sure no doubts remain on account of Raskolnikov's—not "essentially," as Rahv puts it, but *decidedly*—unrepentant state, Dostoevsky explains that, "If only fate had granted him remorse, scalding remorse, harrowing the heart and driving sleep away, such remorse as tortured men into dreaming of the rope or deep still water! Oh, he would have welcomed it gladly! Tears and suffering—they, after all, are also life. But he did not feel remorse for his crime" (458).

I will cite just one example here of the tendency to foist guilt onto *Crime and Punishment* since it relates to our discussion of Richard Wright as well. In "From St. Petersburg to Chicago: Wright's *Crime and Punishment*," Tony Magistrale examines, among other things, "dream symbolism" in *Native Son* and *Crime and Punishment*. Over the course of his analysis, Magistrale infuses Bigger and Raskolnikov with repentance and guilt. "It is through the

language of dreams," Magistrale concludes, "that Wright and Dostoevski represent their protagonists' early stages of remorse" (58). Now, there are no doubt similarities between the two authors' use of symbolism to get at unconscious fears, dreads, and anxieties. But Magistrale's formulation implies that these unconscious feelings give way to later "stages" of "remorse," when this is emphatically not the case in either novel. Not only does this critic therefore problematically inscribe the texts with guilty politics, but he fails to consider the significance of each protagonist's vehement rejection of guilt.[21]

What obtains from these persistent evocations of Dostoevsky's work as a model of personal salvation, radical individualism, and reactionary politics are tendentious readings of Dostoevsky and jejune readings of ex-Communists. While the translation of Mikhail Bakhtin's writings in the 1970s introduced the idea of polyphony in Dostoevsky's art to American audiences, the lack of Bakhtin's insight before that is not enough to explain the overwhelmingly monologic engagements with his works that had prevailed in midcentury America. As Daniel Aaron's comments in the epigraph suggest, there are eminently political factors that have helped determine Dostoevsky's place in the western canon. Except that whereas Aaron presupposes a

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[21] I explained why this is so for Bigger in the previous chapter. In the case of *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's denial of guilt is crucial because it highlights what Dostoevsky saw to be the dangers of western theories and doctrines, the same ones which inspired Raskolnikov's decision to kill the pawnbroker in the first place. As a firm *Slavophile*—a nineteenth-century intellectual movement that believed Russia must pave its own path and reject European influences—Dostoevsky believed radical theories and other influences from the west had a large stake in Raskolnikov's misguided ideas, and in those of Russian youth in general, as he makes clear in the scene where Raskolnikov overhears two young Russian men discussing the idea of killing the same pawnbroker as a result of their exposure to western ideas.

binary opposition between Dostoevsky and the "radical prophets," I contend that this firm opposition has been created largely by the reactionary (American) culture about which Aaron writes rather than by inherent features of Dostoevsky's work. To be as clear as possible: the premise of this inquiry is not that the elements attributed to Dostoevsky's work do not exist at all, but that these elements were strategically emphasized over and against notable other ones. My aim in what follows is twofold: first, through examining how midcentury writers and critics read and adopted Dostoevsky, we hope to learn more about the role of political culture in literary production. Second, in stepping back from these engagements, as it were, and placing them alongside Dostoevsky's work, we wish to show how Dostoevsky's place in the canon has been shaped by a series of one-sided readings. In what might be called a sort of "contrapuntal" reading—to borrow, of course, from the late Edward Said—we hope to decipher how patterns in these ever-persistent (mis)readings of Dostoevsky's work teach us something about the political climate mentioned in the first aim.

Before moving on, a few words are in order about the history of Dostoevsky's reception in America. Dostoevsky was first introduced to American readers at the end of the nineteenth century. However, the few English translations of his work available at the time left much to be desired, as they were in many cases based on previous European translations. It was not until Constance Garnett's translations between 1912 and 1920 that his work became available to a wide English-speaking audience. Thanks to Garnett's prolific career, his work gained wide readership in America after 1920, though it was only somewhat later, in the late-1930s, that he reached the place of preeminence he has enjoyed ever since. While there is yet to be written a complete history of Dostoevsky's cultural reception in America, Maria Bloshteyn's significant contributions deserve mention here; especially when it comes to Dostoevsky's influence on

Henry Miller and Beat generation American writers, southern writers, and African American writers, Bloshteyn alone paved this new ground. This chapter therefore complements Bloshteyn's fine work by providing a more detailed account of the political and social issues at stake in reading Dostoevsky.

"Why the Underground Man is (Quite Possibly) a Fool"[22]

In a preface to the first volume of his landmark biography of Dostoevsky, Joseph Frank explains how the idea for this ambitious five-volume project was conceived in the mid-1950s, when he was asked to conduct a seminar. "At that time I was very much interested," Frank remembers, "in the new Existentialist literature making such a splash in the immediate postwar period, and I chose as my subject the topic, 'Existential Themes in Modern Literature'" (xi). One could hardly imagine such a lecture not focusing at least in part on *Notes from Underground*, and this is precisely where Frank began his analysis. As his interest in existentialism soon began to wane, Frank tells how he refocused his attention to the "social-cultural life of [Dostoevsky's] period" (xii), largely because it had become clear by now that Dostoevsky's art enacts both his own personal dilemmas and those "raging in the society of which he was a part" (xii). Although Frank's study would therefore benefit from the discovery that the existentialist lens was "far from adequate" (xi) for understanding Dostoevsky's life and writings, this account of his study's origins bespeaks the myopic, tendentious framework in which intellectuals were reading Dostoevsky in postwar America.

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[22] While citations from *Notes from Underground* appear in the original Russian, I have also provided translations that are based on David Magarshack's in *The Best Short Stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky*.

In all fairness to Dostoevsky readers of the time, it is worth calling attention to Frank's observation that this was the heyday of existentialist thought in America, and *Notes from Underground* was—and is—among the most influential works in this context. George Cotkin, in a fine overview of existential thought in the U.S., *Existential America* (2005), describes how intellectuals had been prepped for the introduction of French existentialism in the late 1940s by their reading of Dostoevsky and Kafka (108). In a highly influential 1956 study *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Walter Kaufmann attests to the seminal nature of *Notes from Underground* by asserting that "it was an altogether new voice that we hear" (12) in the novella. Perhaps one is less inclined to hold existentialists accountable for reading Dostoevsky somewhat parochially, for finding in him this "new voice," since they discovered in the Underground Man a compelling spokesman for their beliefs—never mind that their line of reasoning may or may not have conflicted with Dostoevsky's intentions or personal views. Kaufmann was aware of potential problems arising from a rapprochement between existentialists and the Russian author: "Dostoevsky was as fascinating as any of his characters; but we must not ascribe to him, who after all believed in God, the outlook and ideas of his underground man" (14). And so, while Kaufmann "can see no reason for calling Dostoevsky an existentialist," he does believe "that Part One of *Notes from Underground* is the best overture for existentialism ever written" (14). Kaufmann deserves credit for not blithely attributing the Underground Man's views to Dostoevsky, something that had become fairly common practice after *Partisan Review*'s publication of Sigmund Freud's "Dostoevsky and Parricide" in 1944. Dostoevsky need not have been an existentialist, Kaufmann's reasoning holds, in order to lay much of the groundwork for existentialist thought. This point is well-taken. In addition to this, however, Kaufmann's logic implies that as far as *Notes from Underground* is concerned, existentialists and countless other

critics who read the novella along similar lines have made no serious missteps in interpreting *that* text.

This is precisely the view that I wish to challenge in the present section. Several problems emerge from Kaufmann's proposition "that Part One of *Notes from Underground* is the best overture for existentialism ever written" (14). The most significant of these problems by far has to do with the "new voice" that Kaufmann and so many others since have heard. To say that "an altogether new voice" can be heard is to attribute coherence, uniformity, and, most importantly, a monologic structure to the novella. Despite the wide currency this reading would gain among existentialists and political apostates in midcentury America, it is a highly problematic interpretation because it overlooks the subtle, but no less important, ways in which *Notes from Underground* conforms to the essentially polyvalent form that has since become, for readers of the Russian philosopher and critic Mikhail Bakhtin, a signature of Dostoevsky's oeuvre. As Bakhtin first suggested, any reading of Dostoevsky must place at its center the inherently polyvalent style which renders a given text truly Dostoevskian. "*A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels*" (6, original emphasis), Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. At least on this account, Joseph Frank concurs with Bakhtin, going so far as to claim that, "Dostoevsky was preeminently a *'dialogic' personality*, who lived intensely in the stream of Russian social-cultural life and projected himself passionately into the issues raised by the Russian world of his time" (156).

That said, *Notes from Underground* presents significant difficulties when it comes to identifying what exactly constitutes the work's dialogic core. Here the main difficulty arises from the novella's first-person narrative. Dostoevsky's novels almost always feature a plethora

of characters and lengthy dialogue between them; in this case, however, we have only the confession of an admittedly crazed man, whose narrative twists and turns can be said to reveal unpredictable idiosyncrasies of the mind and whom we might call predictably idiosyncratic. Yet idiosyncratic is not the same as dialogic. The question of the dialogic core therefore becomes noticeably more difficult in the context of a text which focuses on the thoughts and musings of an individual. Even Bakhtin struggles at times to pin down the precise components of *Notes from Underground* that make it conform to his central premise on discourse in Dostoevsky's art. Bakhtin explains that the most crucial criteria for judging if a work like this one transcends the monologic style to which it in some sense appears condemned due to its first-person narrative is whether or not the author is capable of cutting the "umbilical cord" (51) that unites character with creator. The "monologic unity of the work" breaks down as the "hero becomes relatively free and independent" (51) of the author. Once Dostoevsky breaks this "umbilical cord," the Underground Man engages in dialogue with imaginary interlocutors, and this is key in Bakhtin's mind for understanding the work's dialogic form. Thus, the Underground Man shows signs early on of a preoccupation with possible reactions or objections to what he thinks and does from his imaginary observers; his main task, Bakhtin argues, is to "free [himself] from the power of the other's consciousness and to break through to [his] self for the self alone" (232) by destroying his "own image in another's eyes" (232). Bakhtin calls the equipment with which the Underground Man accomplishes this task "cynicism" and "holy-foolishness" (232).

But the Underground Man is a "fool" in more ways than one, just as *Notes from Underground* is dialogic in more ways than Bakhtin imagined. If the narrator plays a sort of fool so as to emancipate himself from the gaze of the other, he shows himself *to be* a fool when he fails to carry out the mission for which Dostoevsky originally enlists him. In the frequently-

noted, but almost always underestimated, footnote that comes at the beginning of the Underground Man's tract, Dostoevsky writes that, "И автор записок и самые «Записки», разумеется, вымышлены. Тем не менее такие лица, как сочинитель таких записок, не только могут, но даже должны существовать в нашем обществе, взяв в соображение те обстоятельства, при которых вообще складывалось наше общество" (5; Both the author of the Notes and the Notes themselves are, of course, fictitious. Nevertheless, such persons as the author of such memoirs not only may, but must, exist in our society, if we take into consideration the circumstances which led to the formation of our society, 95). Dostoevsky goes on to explain that his intention has been "вывести перед лицо публики…один из характеров протекшего недавнего времени. Это—один из представителей еще доживающего поколения" (5; to bring before our reading public…one of the characters of our recent past. He is one of the representatives of a generation that is still with us, 95). He thus spells out in no uncertain terms that the Underground Man represents a generation of intellectuals from the 1840s known for their idealism and ineffectuality, as seen in the quintessential story of the so-called men of the forties, Ivan Turgenev's *Rudin* (1857). Intellectuals from this earlier generation would later come into conflict with the more radical, and much less ineffectual, intellectuals of the 1860s (a story also told in a Turgenev novel, *Fathers and Sons* [1862]). More importantly, the Underground Man's typicality in this footnote casts him as a decidedly un-free agent. Not only does Dostoevsky lend credence to his depiction of a "fictitious" character by claiming that that character *must* exist, but he also signals the Underground Man's dependence upon a set of external "circumstances." This is crucial in the context of what comes next.

Whereas in the lines cited above Dostoevsky is the one bringing his character before the reading public, a shift in pronouns takes place mere lines later in the same footnote, whereby

Dostoevsky effaces himself and enlists the Underground Man to bring his own self before the public. That is to say, we discover in this moment that Dostoevsky and the Underground Man share the same project. "В этом отрывке, озаглавленном «Подполье», это лицо рекомендуют самого себя, свой взгляд и как бы хочет выяснить те причины, по которым оно явилось и должно было явиться в нашей среде" (5; In this extract, entitled *Underground* this person introduces himself and his views and, as it were, tries to explain those causes which have not only led, but also were bound to lead, to his appearance in our midst, 95). In a disappearing act, Dostoevsky takes his exist and leaves it up to the Underground Man to account for his own "appearance." Yet again, Dostoevsky reinforces the idea that the Underground Man's existence is predicated on a set of external circumstances which were bound to lead to his emergence, except this time he ascribes this consciousness to the Underground Man. Many critics—Bakhtin included—have focused solely on the self-consciousness of the narrator as it relates to his subjective existence, but in this moment we discover that he also possesses a general consciousness of the world and his place in it. There is no other moment that more suitably captures the way in which, as Bakhtin put it, Dostoevsky "renounces all…monologic premises" (52) by "turn[ing] over to his hero" (52) a consciousness of the "objective authorial world" (52) from which he was imagined. Paradoxically enough, then, even as the opening footnote plays the crucial role of freeing the protagonist from authorial presence, it simultaneously relegates him to a subjectivity that is determined by external circumstances.

Considering the obvious problems these lines present for staple existentialist tenets like freedom and self-making—which, as we will see in the next section, many ex-radicals also embraced—it is not difficult to imagine why existentialists have tended to overlook the full implications of this footnote. What is more difficult to imagine is why so many critics have as

well. These lines not only reveal much about the authorial stance Dostoevsky assumes vis-à-vis his subject matter but also provide the backdrop against which *Notes from Underground* must be read. This is where I will diverge from Bakhtin's reading. Bakhtin writes that "there is literally nothing we can say about the hero of 'Notes from Underground' that he does not already know himself" (52); in the list of things the hero already knows, Bakhtin includes "his typicality for his time and social group" (52). However, while it is true the Underground Man recognizes both his typicality and his contingency on a set of external circumstances at the outset, this does not hold true throughout the text. It is important to bear in mind that the Underground Man writes his confession when he is already in his forties, having occupied his "funk-hole" for the past twenty years; Part Two of the novella is his account in the present of events that took place twenty years ago. In looking more carefully at his narrative, it is apparent that he has not always had this level of consciousness (of the world and his place in it) at his disposal, and that, even in the present, he loses sight of this basic truth about his existence in several key moments. Therefore, insofar as the opening footnote carries the weight of the Underground Man's *and* Dostoevsky's judgment, it threatens to undermine major features of the Underground Man's project—some of the same features that existentialists and others have been quick to rally behind. The impartial and dispassionate views set forth by the author and the narrator in the footnote provide a weighty counterpoint to views, not nearly so impartial or dispassionate, subsequently expressed by the narrator.

The Underground Man thus vacillates between the figure Dostoevsky originally enlisted him as and the "fool" who, in the subsequent outpouring of emotions, lets his emotions get the better of him. This vacillation gives rise to the narrator's essential "unfinalizability" (53), as Bakhtin puts it. For example, the Underground Man begins his account in a manner that more or

less corresponds to his appointed task. The famous opening line, "Я человек больной…Я злой человек" (5; I am a sick man…I am a spiteful man, 95), together with the rest of the first paragraph, emphasize the end result of his inevitable "appearance in our midst" and give us a good sense of the type of individual we are dealing with. Having revealed the end result, he then tells how he came to be who he is, much as in the classic Bildungsroman. He tells how he has been living like this for some twenty years and how, until recently, he had worked as a civil servant. His recollection of time spent in the civil service is the first instance when he begins to diverge from the determinism established at the outset. During his days in the civil service, the Underground Man would engage in all sorts of contrived quarrels with people visiting his office for the sole purpose of "spiting" them. The peculiar thing about this behavior in the case of the narrator is that it runs contrary to his nature: as he reports, "я поминутно сознавал в себе много-премного самых противоположных тому элементов" (6; I was always conscious of innumerable elements [in me] which were absolutely contrary to that, 97).

The Underground Man's ability to act in a spiteful manner necessitates the active repression of those "elements" (97) in him which are predisposed to non-spiteful behavior. About these "elements," the Underground Man explains: "я чувствовал, что они так и кишат во мне, эти противоположные элементы. Я знал, что они всю жизнь во мне кишели и из меня вон наружу просились, н я из не пускал, не пускал, нарочно не пускал наружу" (6; I felt them simply swarming in me all my life and asking to be allowed to come out, but I wouldn't let them. I would not let them! I would deliberately not let them, 97). In surveying the fiction of Nikolai Gogol or Franz Kafka, who famously depict civil service work in graphic detail, one could easily draw the conclusion that there is something intrinsic to the nature of this work which encourages spiteful behavior. Yet the Underground Man casts his spiteful actions as emanating

from a space over which he bears complete control; after all, he can act spitefully in spite of himself, and only because he wills it, not because of the nature of civil service work. Already the narrator implicitly denies the role of determinants in his life, emphasizing instead the control he wields over the manner with which he comports himself on the job. His appearance in our midst was necessary, but not his spiteful behavior in the workplace. A subsequent revelation made in passing throws a shadow of doubt over these previous claims. "Я служил, чтоб было что-нибудь есть (но единственно для этого), и когда прошлого года один из отдаленных моих родственников оставил мне шесть тысяч рублей по духовному завещанию, я тотчас же вышел в отставку и поселился у себя в углу" (7; I got myself a job in the Civil Service because I had to eat [and only for that reason], and when a distant relative of mine left me six thousand roubles in his will last year, I immediately resigned from the Civil Service and settled in my little corner, 98). According to the timeline implicit in this admission, the death of his distant relative secured him freedom in just the past year; before that—including the time when he was willfully spiteful at work—his life was, as he notes here, determined at least by financial hardship. Willful or not, his spitefulness on the job was contingent on the pure necessity that forced him to get the job in the first place.

This duplicity runs throughout the novella, producing a fundamental disjunction in the narrative that has been overlooked by critics who hear a version of the "new voice" Kaufmann noted. Andre Bernstein and Alina Wyman come closest to capturing these opposed tendencies in their discussion of Nietzsche's concept "ressentiment" in *Notes from Underground*. Bernstein and Wyman offer much insight into interrelated themes in Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, but when it comes to Dostoevsky's work, they tend to eviscerate the text's dialogic features in the name of diagnosing the Underground Man and fitting him into the ressentiment model. While

Dostoevsky's narrator unquestionably displays characteristics of Nietzschean ressentiment, Bernstein's and Wyman's focus on how he either succumbs to or, as Wyman would have it, overcomes feelings of ressentiment mimics the practice of "monoligiz[ing]" (Bakhtin 8) Dostoevsky's imagination. We must consider not only moments of ressentiment or non-ressentiment in the narrator but how these impulses remain a function of the aesthetic modalities at work in the novella. Bernstein's and Wyman's logic, for example, would suggest that the Underground Man's spitefulness at work "compensates" (a central concept of Nietzschean ressentiment) for his powerlessness by casting his spiteful behavior as willed. This reasoning, however, makes the mistake of collapsing the inherent contradictions, the "unfinalizability," of both the narrative and the narrator into terms of the Underground Man's psychological ressentiment.

By placing due emphasis on the footnote as a framework for the Underground Man's narrative, one can begin to consider the work in its dialogic dimensions. A number of common misreadings of key passages from the text stem from a failure to consider the full implication of the opening footnote, especially the temporality it presupposes. Perhaps the most notable example of such a passage is the one where the narrator reflects on his *former* debauchery. Section Two begins in a fashion that comports with the etiological approach signaled at the outset, with the Underground Man explaining why it is that he has "я даже и насекомым не сумел сделаться" (7; never been able to become even an insect, 98). His desire to talk about himself, however, marks a shift in the narrative away from world in favor of *self*-consciousness. Incidentally, this also corresponds with his first efforts to adumbrate the difference between the "непосредственные люди и деятели" (7; so-called plain men and men of action, 99) and the "развитый" (intelligent, 99) or thinking men, two archetypes that will occupy him for much of

the remainder of Part One. From this point on, the narrator is concerned not so much with the "circumstances" of historical emergence as with various attributes of both "plain men" and "thinking men," which are really atemporal typologies of people. What makes several passages in this section exceptionally difficult, then, is that the narrator couches his rhetoric in universalist terms—corresponding with the necessary register to describe atemporal typologies—even though his account remains an essentially historical-phenomenological one. So he writes about his debauchery:

> Скажите мне вот что: отчего так бывало, что, как нарочно, в те самые, да, в те же самые минуты, в которые я наиболее способен был сознавать все тонкости «всего прекрасного и высокого», как говорили у нас когда-то, мне случалось уже не сознавать, а делать такие неприглядные деянья, такие, которые…ну да, одним словом, которые хоть и все, пожалуй, делают, но которые, как нарочно, приходились у меня именно тогда, когда я наиболее сознавал, что их совсем бы не надо делать? Чем больше я сознавал о добре и о всем этом «прекрасном и высоком», тем глубже я и опускался в мою тину и тем способнее был совершенно завязнуть в ней. Но главная черта была в том, что все это как будто не случайно во мне было, а как будто ему и следовало так быть. Как будто это было мое самое нормальное состояние, а отнюдь не болезнь и не порча, так что, наконец, у меня и охота прошла бороться с этой порчей. Кончилось тем, что я чуть не поверил (а может, и в самом деле поверил), что это, пожалуй, и есть нормальное мое состояние. (8)

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(Tell me this: why did it invariably happen that just at those moments—yes, at those very moments—when I was acutely conscious of "the sublime and beautiful," as we used to call it in those days, I was not only conscious but also guilty of the most contemptible actions which—well, which, in fact, everybody is guilty of, but which, as though on purpose, I only happened to commit when I was most conscious that they ought not to be committed? The more conscious I became of goodness and all that was "sublime and beautiful," the more deeply did I sink into the mire and the more ready I was to sink into it altogether. And the trouble was that all this did not seem to happen to me by accident, but as though it couldn't possibly have happened otherwise. As though it were my normal condition, and not in the least a disease or a vice, so that at last I no longer even attempted to fight against this vice. It ended by my almost believing (and perhaps I did actually believe) that this was probably my normal condition. [99-100])

Of all passages in *Notes from Underground*, this one has caused perhaps the most confusion. The lines that invariably pose the toughest challenge are the ones where the Underground Man discusses how he felt as if this were his "normal condition"—so much so that he ceased "to fight against this vice." Also difficult are the lines in which he describes his feeling of "delight" in the knowledge that he had run into a "blank wall," that "it couldn't be helped," and that "there was no escape." The in many ways duplicitous terminology found here has prompted several critics to conclude that in this moment the Underground Man "confesses his flirtation with the belief in determinism" (Wyman 127). Even Joseph Frank, the foremost Dostoevsky authority, claims that the Underground Man adopts in this moment the Nihilistic belief in absolute determinism as a sort of "parody" (54) on the ideas of Nikolai

Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* (1863) According to Frank, Dostoevsky has the

Underground Man "use Chernyshevsky's philosophy as an excuse for his moral flaccidity" (54)

to undermine that same philosophy.

The problem with these assessments is that the Underground Man clearly has in mind

Kant, not Chernyshevsky, a crucial distinction in temporal and cultural as much as philosophical

terms. It is true that the Underground Man makes an allusion to Chernyshevsky in a later

moment (in the beginning of Section Seven, with the lines beginning: "О, скажите, кто это

первый обьявил…" [16; Oh, tell me who was it first said…,111]), but in the passage cited at

length above, the Underground Man explicitly references Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of*

the Beautiful and the Sublime, published in 1764, as well as—albeit much more indirectly—

Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785). And so, bearing in mind the temporality

implicit in the footnote and the narrator's reference to Kant's terms "sublime and beautiful" as

having been in vogue "in those days," we can deduce that the Underground Man is actually

recalling a much earlier time in his life, the generation of the 1840s. That being the case, it is

unlikely that he intends to conjure up the anachronistic idea of men of the 1840s pondering

notions like absolute determinism, which would not reach intellectual circles in Russia until the

1860s.

Rather than suggesting that his dissolute lifestyle was beyond his control, the

Underground Man gives in this moment a historical-phenomenological account of his

debauchery. First and foremost a critique of Kant's assumption that enlightened men will follow

moral law, the so-called "categorical imperative," the Underground Man relates how his own

experience seemingly refutes Kant's theory. Though conscious and enlightened, he could not

help from slipping into debauchery; he could not follow the moral code which he ought to follow.

At this earlier time, he felt as though all this "couldn't possibly have happened otherwise." (The Russian here is actually more unambiguous: he experienced his debauchery as though it were arising from "within him" ["во мне," he says].) Thus, he expresses the idea that there is a non-changing core within him, and while this may on some level imply a state of irresponsibility, this moment actually signals the narrator's eventual defense of free will. Dostoevsky foreshadows this shift in terms with a shift in the narrator's relationship to his debauchery: "А сперва-то, вначале-то, сколько я муки вытерпел в этой борьбе! Я не верил, чтоб так бывало с другими, и потому всю жизнь таил это про себя как секрет" (8; At first, at the very outset, I mean, what horrible agonies I used to suffer in that struggle! I did not think others had the same experience, and afterwards I kept it to myself as though it were a secret, 100).

Feeling as if he were a sort of abomination, the Underground Man conveys his torment over the possibility that his "normal condition" diverges from the normative for others. However, when debauchery begins to call out not for feelings of moral trepidation but for what he calls "позорная, проклятая сладость" (8; a sort of shameful, damnable sweetness) or a "в наслаждение, в наслаждение!" (8; real, positive delight!, 100), the narrator displays signs of his eventual belief that his evil deeds reflect the doings of an inner kernel of freedom. His debauchery, in other words, transforms in this moment into a symbol of the workings of an authentic self. In this way, the Underground Man superimposes several polyvalent layers onto his narrative. On each layer, moreover, there are at least two separate vectors—the historical and the ahistorical, the free and the un-free, immanence and transcendence, fool and intelligent—which work in tandem to create the texts complex dialogic fabric. To reduce the work to any one of these vectors would be to commit a grave injustice to Dostoevsky's art; these contradictions must be preserved as an integral part of the novella's aesthetics.

Interestingly, biographical evidence points to the view that Dostoevsky espoused these principles not only in his aesthetic practices but in his own life as well. In a compelling reading of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1861), Nancy Ruttenburg arrives at this as the only possible answer to the countless antinomies that Dostoevsky's art raises. *Notes from the House of the Dead*, which is based on Dostoevsky's experiences in a Siberian labor camp, tells of the daily life of prisoners and reflects, at times philosophically, on crime, punishment, and individual conscience. The narrator Gorianchikov has a difficult time making sense of the lack of remorse that he witnesses in many of his fellow convicts and this leads him to grapple with issues of accountability. At least in these matters, Dostoevsky apparently shared Gorianchikov's irresolution. In her analysis of a scene in which Gorianchikov rejects the liberal view that one can attribute crimes to the effects of "environment" (123), Ruttenburg points out how Gorianchikov's musings anticipate a thread that will extend throughout much of Dostoevsky's later writing, including polemical texts such as *Diary of a Writer*. Dostoevsky grapples explicitly with this idea in a 1873 entry of this polemical text entitled "The Environment." The intended purpose of the entry, Ruttenburg explains, is to refute "the liberal theory of the influence of the environment on behavior, which defense lawyers had effectively invoked" (126) and to support a virtual equivalent to that idea, expressed at the time in the common peoples' notion of "misfortune." As Ruttenburg ably demonstrates, Dostoevsky's discussion ultimately breaks down when he is forced to admit that the liberal theory "somehow explains something, at least it provides a way out of the darkness, and without [it] there is only bewilderment, utter gloom inhabited by some madman" (Ruttenburg 132).

"On the Politics of Underground Poetics"

The striking number of ex-Communists who found in *Notes from Underground* a model for political apostasy warrants further critical attention; it also obliges us to examine how these engagements have in turn influenced the way we read Dostoevsky. Eugene Lyons's *Assignment in Utopia* (1937) and Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940) stand as harbingers of the genre of ex-Communist writing in question here. By delineating the formative influence that Dostoevsky had on Lyons and Koestler, I hope to give a sense of the extent to which these early engagements with Dostoevsky set a precedent for later ones. Indeed, there is no small amount of irony in the fact that ex-Communists have mimicked the Underground Man's periodic "foolishness" by interpreting the novella as a celebration of the guilty conscience. And the confessional project of political apostates hinges on this "foolishness" inasmuch as its aim is almost always to inscribe past actions with a sense of their having been willed, thereby inflating their own responsibility, and guilt, in the matter. This sort of poetics often therefore presupposes that all subjects are intrinsically free and responsible.

Underground poetics has come to mean guilty conscience. This, in turn, has made it possible to view the Underground Man's musings as comprising a viable ontological state that can be imported wholesale into ex-radical narratives, though not before disemboweling Dostoevsky's text of its rich aesthetic dimensions. Aside from providing the text's dialogic form, the Underground Man's "foolishness" serves on one level to undermine both his feelings of guilt and the confession they inspire. Thus Dostoevsky anticipates later thinkers who question the legitimacy of confessions. As J. L. Austin notes, a crucial distinction must be made concerning every act of confession: on the one side, there is the constative aspect—the guilt to which one confesses, especially the deed that inspires guilt—while, on the other, there is the performative

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aspect, which includes all that goes along with performing actual confession. The main caveat here, as Peter Brooks shows in a reading of the ribbon scene in Rousseau's *Confessions* (heavily influenced as it is by Paul de Man's in *Allegories of Reading* [1979]), is that there is always the all too real "possibility that the performative aspect will produce the constative, create the sin or guilt that the act of confessing requires" (Brooks 21).

In contrast to Rousseau and the overwhelming majority of ex-radicals, the Underground Man succumbs not to a performative aspect—he claims not to be writing for an audience—but to feelings of guilt which his confession is meant to quell. Overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, the narrator speaks of memories that are "oppressing" and "haunting" (129) him; the process of writing about this guilt, he says, is a sort of cathartic, and therapeutic, release of burdens: "I simply must get rid of it," he explains (129). Much as in the case of Rousseau, however, the Underground Man ends up titillating his guilt more than he disbands it. What's more, by his own admission, the account he gives is an eminently partial and skewed one in the sense that he recalls *exclusively* regretful deeds. And yet, when considered objectively, apart from the effusion of emotion that inspires this tract, the deeds he recounts (the constative aspect) hardly warrant the extreme guilt and self-loathing that he has subjected himself to for the past twenty years. The same can be said about many ex-radical narratives. But while the critical methodologies necessary for illuminating these dynamics in confessional discourse have been available for some time, critics have been on the whole reluctant to make use of them while interpreting the writings of political apostates. In revisiting these often-forgotten texts with a critical eye, my goal is to call attention to problems inherent in both attributing a monologic voice to Dostoevsky's work and uncritically accepting the confessions of ex-Communists.

We will begin our discussion with Eugene Lyons. Lyons worked as an American journalist in Moscow for United Press from 1928 to 1934. Having grown up in poverty in Manhattan and Brooklyn, Lyons experienced first-hand the oppression caused by a "social system that breeds such plague spots" (14). Over the years Lyons's indignation on account of his own destitution grew into a sympathy for all exploited, and although he never joined the Communist Party, he maintained close ties with it and contributed to various leftist publications. As the story goes in *Assignment in Utopia*, which was largely written upon his return from Russia and published in 1937, the young journalist arrived in Russia enamored by the potentialities of the grand experiment taking place there. Lyons recounts early attempts to whitewash negative aspects of Soviet life in order to appease readers and colleagues, who were, in his own estimation, overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Soviet cause. He then proceeds to give a thorough record of his disillusionment.

Much as in future stories of disenchantment, the post-disillusioned state in which Lyons composed the work permeates almost every page. This is so much the case that even though only the penultimate section of the book bears the title "Disillusionment," this sentiment overflows onto virtually all other sections of the narrative as well. Here we might paradoxically enough include early sections (e.g., "Hallelujah!") when he is still supposedly a believer in the cause. Thus even Lyons's account of his early time in Moscow is quite evidently overshadowed by the disillusioned state he was in while writing the text, as he focuses on present thoughts of how "love is blind" or how "faith is both deaf and blind" (93) rather than on the conditions that led to his indignation with capitalism in the first place or the intrinsic merit of his attempts to combat sources of that indignation. Lyons celebrates guilty conscience and revels in it; for him, as for many ex-Communists to follow, his disillusionment is a sign of maturity, wisdom, and

humanity. On several occasions, he describes his break with the radical movement as coinciding more generally with his acquiring a conscience.

For these reasons, Lyons's text stands as a direct descendant of ex-Communist confessions appearing over the course of the next decade and a half. *Assignment in Utopia* notably served as an important source of inspiration for the most widely read anticommunist novel, George Orwell's *1984* (1949), which takes its famous symbol for Totalitarian ideology directly from the title of one of Lyons's chapters, "Two Plus Two Equals Five." Of course, Lyons's phrase itself was taken from the Underground Man's famous use of the expression "twice two equals four" as a symbol for western rationalism. Lyons's work can add to its list of accolades credit for being an acknowledged source of inspiration for Whittaker Chambers's (perhaps the most famous ex-Communists) break with the Communist Party.[23] Another key source of inspiration for Chambers's break with the Party, and for Lyons's break as well, was Dostoevsky, and both *Witness* and *Assignment in Utopia* are littered with references or allusions to the Russian author. Whereas Chambers appears to have fashioned himself in the manner of a Dostoevskyan hero, as Philip Rahv's and Irving Howe's comments above suggest, Lyons's allusions to Dostoevsky are far more subtle. In one scene, he tells about when he was "all of thirteen" and on his way to a "Socialist Sunday School" with "the weight of suffering humanity on my thin shoulders and a volume of Dostoievsky under my arm" (7). In other instances, Lyons draws parallels to Dostoevsky's characters while observing Russians or discussing "Russian psychology" (127). Other clues suggest an even more sustained engagement with Dostoevsky.

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[23] In *Witness* Chambers states that "*Assignment in Utopia* was one of the books that influenced my break with Communism" (241).

Most notably, Lyons relies at crucial moments on language, terminology, and ideas taken from memorable moments in *Notes from Underground*. Though indicative of an oversimplified reading of Dostoevsky, Lyons is especially drawn to moments when the Underground Man speaks on behalf of individualism, personal liberty, and freedom at all costs. For example, Lyons explains how disenchantment was coextensive with his discovery of a "perspective" (197) or a "vantage point" (197) that was in sync with the prerogatives of the individual, whom he now holds as sacrosanct. Further, Lyons reflects on how the "existences of individual men and women" were "somehow overlooked in the obsession of sociological research" (219) typical of his days in the Party. Only upon his disillusionment with Communism and his break with the Party did individuals begin to "register" (219) in his mind.

Lyons was not the only one to associate a newfound respect for the individual with a better appreciation of Dostoevsky's art. His comments above anticipate the general move away from sociological research in favor of psychological studies that this period witnessed. In *The Agony of the American Left* (1969), Christopher Lasch adumbrates the decline of a certain sociological perspective that Lyons references above and links sociology's decline directly with the history of ex-Communism. According to Lasch, the "strong undercurrent of ex-Communism" (67) that runs through debates of this period informs the concomitant fascination with freedom and personal liberty, topics in vogue among ex-Communists. This narrative in turn "merged imperceptibly with the dogmatic attack on historical materialism which, in another context, has done so much to impede historical and sociological scholarship in the period of the cold war" (67). Though Lasch reads this focus on freedom as derivative of a "cruder sort of Marxist cant" (67) dating back to the days of Communist sympathizing, it comes just as much if not more from a series of engagements with Dostoevsky. As evidence for his assessment, Lasch cites the

example of an ex-Communist named Franz Borkenau, yet what he fails to realize is that Borkenau's emphasis on individual freedom came not so much from a cruder Marxist cant as from an engagement with Dostoevsky. In his history of Russian Decembrists from 1825, Borkenau tells about discussions taking place in early eighteenth-century revolutionary circles as to the nature of the society they would build; according to him, the place of the individual in that society was one of the central topics around which these debates revolved. Without needing to explain in any detail how this story went, Borkenau ends by saying merely that, "Dostoevsky has told the story" (qtd. from *Literary Underground* 51). Although Borkenau likely has in mind Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, it is equally possible, judging by Lyons's remarks, that his belief in the sanctity of the individual comes from an all-too-familiar reading of the Underground Man.

It would not take long for American authors, particularly ex-Communists, to begin monologizing Dostoevsky's art in remarkably similar ways. Saul Bellow, himself a former Communist sympathizer, wrote his first book *Dangling Man* (1944) about an ex-Communist named Joseph whose journal entries—what he calls a record of his "inward transactions" (7)—constitute the short novella. "Dangling" clearly shares a close affinity with whatever it is in Bellow's mind that the Underground Man does, since Joseph descends directly from the Underground Man. Originally entitled "Notes of a Dangling Man," Bellow in the end dropped "Notes" from the title; this does not, however, minimize the formative influence that Dostoevsky's work had on Bellow's early career: his second novel, *The Victim* (1947), was inspired by Dostoevsky's *The Eternal Husband* (1870). Interestingly, the main difference between *Dangling Man* and *Notes from Underground* is that whereas for Dostoevsky's narrator the underground represents a permanent and almost inevitable way of life, for Joseph it

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symbolizes merely a temporary state of mind, made possible only by his escape for the time being from forces counterproductive to "dangling": statism.

Much as we saw in Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground," the underground thematic from Dostoevsky's poetics took on an antistatist bent in Bellow's imagination. In Joseph's final journal entry, he learns about his draft into the army and writes that he is "no longer to be held accountable for [himself]" but that he is "grateful for that": "I am in other hands, relieved of self-determination, freedom canceled. Hurray for regular hours! And for the supervision of the spirit! Long live regimentation!" (126) Reunion with state means an end to dangling. Joseph's welcoming attitude toward the cancelling of freedom here must be taken with a grain of salt, since only twenty pages earlier he came to the conclusion that "all striving is for one end," with that end being the "desire for pure freedom" (102).

By far the most influential work in the genre of ex-radical writing, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* has furnished many ex-Communists with a model of political apostasy since its publication in 1940. One could even argue that a recent novel such as Olga Grushin's *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* (2005) owes a tremendous debt to Koestler's novel for everything from its literary techniques and dominant motifs to its political assumptions. *Darkness at Noon*, in its own turn, would not have been conceivable without Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. As Michael Scammell explains in his recent biography, *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic* (2009), Koestler "worshipped" (33) Dostoevsky. "As a mature writer," Scammell writes, "Koestler rejected the 'game' of looking for influences but allowed that Dostoevsky, Stendhal, and Hamsun had stimulated him to begin writing" (33).

The novel never explicitly states where it takes place, but Koestler clearly had in mind Soviet Russia during the Moscow Show Trials, as he dedicates the work to victims of those Trials. The story focuses on the perspective of Rubashov, a devoted party member for most of his life and one of the "Old Bolsheviks" who carried out the revolution. Rubashov's imprisonment in the opening scene signals the displacement of this older generation by a younger one under the guidance of Number One, a clear stand-in for Joseph Stalin. In the remainder of the story, Rubashov languishes in prison while awaiting his sentence and relives from his cell the bulk of his life as a high-ranking party official. Meanwhile, he faces periodic interrogations, first by Ivanov, a former comrade, and then, when Ivanov himself is executed, by Gletkin. The latter carries out his interrogation duties with a wickedness that characterizes the new generation. At least in the case of Rubashov, however, the interrogations are superfluous, since the prisoner has already commenced a process of self-interrogation that quickly morphs into a state of self-loathing and guilt eerily reminiscent of the Underground Man's.

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose analysis of *Darkness at Noon* in *Humanism and Terror* (1947) remains one of the most compelling to date, correctly observes that Rubashov conforms strictly with the "objective" (10) during his days in the Party. This means that what matters is the idea of "objective sabotage or objective treason—intentions notwithstanding" (10); the idea of an inner, subjective world counts for little or nothing at this point. Beginning shortly after imprisonment, Rubashov moves away from an objective-oriented existence and discovers the "inner grasp" of subjective life, as a consciousness "outside time and space" (11). Merleau-Ponty ably demonstrates Koestler's obtuseness in Marxist philosophy, as can be judged by the latter's problematic invocations of Marx in Rubashov's lengthy musings, and concludes that the problem with Koestler's critique of Rubashov's world stems from a

misreading of Marx. Rubashov's critique, however, derives not only from a misreading of Marx; in terms of both language and poetics, it also derives from a by-now-familiar misreading of Dostoevsky.

In several examples that Merleau-Ponty cites as evidence for his claims, and in others that he did not cite but just as well may have, Dostoevsky is as important a point of reference as Marx. This includes those passages where Koestler discusses how life ought to be governed by "statistics" (16) or how the Party makes decisions using the "rules of arithmetic" or "geometric proofs" (159) or how the "individual is sacrosanct" (159) or how the individual must always be seen as free and accountable. Merleau-Ponty uses these examples to illuminate Koestler's deficient understanding of Marxism, but those same examples come from Koestler's equally, if not more, deficient reading of Dostoevsky. In a particularly memorable moment, Merleau-Ponty writes: "But who said that history is a clockwork and the individual a wheel? It was not Marx; it was Koestler" (23). Perhaps this line should read as follows: "It was not Marx; it was Koestler *reading Dostoevsky*."

Koestler's misreading of Dostoevsky is on par with his misreading of Marx. As we have observed before, Koestler sees the Underground Man as a kind of metonymy for the spirit of Dostoevsky's work as a whole, and even for Dostoevsky himself. At one point, Rubashov is deliberating over mistakes that he sees in party policy when he draws a parallel to Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. Rubashov makes the dubious claim that Raskolnikov's theory "collapses [again, I am not so sure it does, especially since Dostoevsky goes to great lengths to highlight the lack of remorse Raskolnikov feels mere pages before the end of the novel] because Raskolnikov discovers that twice two are not four when the mathematical units are human beings" (159). Referring of course to the Underground Man's metaphor for rationalism, "twice two

equals four," Rubashov thus collapses Raskolnikov and the Underground Man in a manner not uncommon even today. All that remains is for Rubashov to tell of how Raskolnikov becomes repentant and seeks salvation.

As in *Notes from Underground*, *Assignment in Utopia*, and numerous ex-Communist confessions that follow on the heels of Koestler's novel, the specter of a guilty past looms over the narrative of *Darkness at Noon*, rendering it all but impossible for Rubashov to situate his current, reformed self. Since the referent of guilt (i.e., constative aspect) always lies in the past, guilty meditations are perforce concerned with history. Just as the Underground Man's guilt informs the manner with which he remembers the past, so too do ex-radicals tend to remember the past based on the needs of their present (reformed) selves. Of the relatively few critics who actually spoke out against the proliferation of ex-Communist confession in the 1940s and 1950s, none of them did so because of concerns for the veracity of the confessions. Murray Hausnecht, in one of the first serious treatments of political confessions, "Confession and Return," therefore criticizes ex-radical confessions for how they induce conformity, but nowhere does he raise the question of the actual reliability of these confessions.

The fact that this question has preoccupied theorists of confession more generally for some time now, except when the confession is of an ex-radical, highlights abiding anticommunist biases. A central task of future critical work on this topic is therefore to grapple with these issues, and one place to start is with the pact that each author of political disillusionment enters into with his or her reader. On the one hand, the penitent author or character asks the reader to be co-witness to the evil that he has been capable of—often, as in the case of Rubashov, in the not so distant past. On the other hand, the act of repenting itself purports to confirm the uprightness, courage, and moral integrity of the same individual who was

capable in the recent past of what the Underground Man calls "dastardly acts." Since political confessions have most often been seen as attesting to the Niebuhrian idea of man's inherent corruption and sin, the question arises: how is it possible for the ex-Communist to have been so abruptly reformed?

Ex-radical confessions maneuver their way around this issue by depicting time and history the way it is experienced by the penitent. In a successful implementation of this literary device, time is skewed so that the past seems more distant than it really is. This happens in *Darkness at Noon* when, upon being imprisoned, Rubashov remembers the bulk of his life in a relatively short span of time; the density—and intensity—of emotional experience he undergoes, all while occupying a small prison cell, creates the impression that more time has elapsed since remembered events than is actually the case. By exaggerating the pastness of the past in this way, the penitent's in fact abrupt transformation is rendered all the more believable, while his emotional and moral torments create a sense of pathos. In *Darkness at Noon* this technique also serves the function of masking contradictions at the heart of the narrative: while there must be no questions regarding Rubashov's present moral uprightness, to which his account attests on virtually every page, we are to believe that a not-much-older-Rubashov was capable of abominable acts, such as condemning his beloved to death through his own silence in order to save himself. Interestingly, similar techniques can be discerned in the work of a generation of postwar political and cultural commentators who were eager to put their radical past firmly behind them. In an attempt to emphasize the pastness of the past, for example, Daniel Bell asserts, almost triumphantly, in *The End of Ideology* that, "little of this [the politics of the thirties] has meaning today" (14).

In the remainder of this chapter I will briefly discuss engagements with Dostoevsky by American authors who were not necessarily ex-Communists, in an effort to show how paradigms established by ex-Communists have influenced future interpretations of Dostoevsky's art. Though a number of other texts could also be included in this discussion—Norman Mailer's *Barbary Shore* (1951), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), and Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957) being the most obvious—the following is meant to be an initial step in the direction of indexing Dostoevsky's lasting influence on midcentury American writers. With that in mind, I will turn my attention now to J. D. Salinger's reading of Dostoevsky in one of the most influential novels of twentieth-century American letters.

"Underground Poetics in *The Catcher in the Rye*"

J. D. Salinger's debt to Dostoevsky has not gone completely unnoticed. In an often-quoted remark from a rare interview he gave around the time *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) was published, Salinger said, "A writer, when he's asked to describe his craft, ought to get up and call out in a loud voice just the names of the writers he loves. I love Kafka, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Proust, O'Casey, Rilka, Lorca, Keats, Rimbaud, Burns, Emily Bronte, Jane Austin, Henry James, Blake, Coleridge" (Slawenski 182). Just because Salinger lists Dostoevsky's name among seventeen others hardly justifies picking out Dostoevsky as an exceptional source of inspiration. Nonetheless, critic Lilian Furst makes the case for Dostoevsky as a key point of reference on the grounds that, in addition to the scant acknowledgement above, Salinger directly alludes to Dostoevsky's work in at least two short stories: "The Last Day of the Last Furlough" and "Seymour: An Introduction." Furst concludes that the combination of these remarks and references, together with rather apparent similarities between *Notes from*

Underground and *The Catcher in the Rye*, provide sufficient evidence for a "rapprochement" (Furst 72) between the two authors.

Although I intend to confirm Furst's overall conclusion that Dostoevsky was an exceptional source of inspiration for Salinger, I wish to give a more thorough literary and cultural explanation for this conclusion and to problematize assumptions of harmony implicit in the term "rapprochement." Furst conscientiously addresses the "distance between the two works in both period and location," which is of course "considerable" (73), and then defends her juxtaposition of the two novels by saying that concerns over distance are "unimportant" when matters of "reciprocal exegesis" (73) are at stake. "What matters fundamentally," Furst avers, "is not the outer relationship (closeness or distance in time or space) of the elements in the comparison, but the existence of a truly organic inner link between them" (73). The "organic link" is far less nebulous than Furst makes it sound. After all, it does not come solely from the direct influence Dostoevsky had on Salinger by way of Salinger's reading Dostoevsky. There is, it should by now be clear, an even more weighty explanation for this "organic link" that has to do with the broad influence that Dostoevsky had had by the early fifties on other American authors, including those discussed in this chapter. The case for Dostoevsky's indirect influence on Salinger by way of other American authors is supported by the fact that Salinger is considered one of the most well versed authors of his time. Unmistakable continuities between Salinger's invocations of Dostoevsky and those of his contemporaries certainly suggest that Salinger was influenced as much by contemporary readings of Dostoevsky as by the Russian author's actual works. Not only does Furst seem unaware of the status Dostoevsky held in American culture during this time, but she recapitulates monologizing readings of *Notes from Underground* by assuming it to be something of an ode to an individualism that Holden could embrace.

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It is surely a testament to Dostoevsky's status that two of the most influential American novels of the twentieth century, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Ellison's *Invisible Man*, bear the indelible imprint of *Notes from Underground*. In contrast to Furst, critics have not been nearly so sheepish in calling attention to Ellison's debt to Dostoevsky. This is because Ellison was far more forthright than Salinger about Dostoevsky's influence on his novel. In a 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ellison reflects on the way he "coax[ed]" his future character "into revealing a bit more about himself" (xix). The image in his mind of what became the Invisible Man was, Ellison writes, both "young" and "powerless" and "ambitious for a role of leadership," even though this was "a role at which he was doomed to fail" (xix). Ellison "associated [the Invisible Man], ever so distantly, with the narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*" (xix); "and with that," Ellison goes on to explain, "I began to structure the movement of my plot, while he began to merge with my more specialized concerns with fictional form and with certain problems arising out of the pluralistic literary tradition from which I spring" (xix). Together, *Invisible Man* and *The Catcher in the Rye* mark the apotheosis of more than a decade's worth of persistent engagement with Dostoevsky's work, especially *Notes from Underground*, by American intellectuals. The way Ellison fashions his role as an author in passive terms, so that the conception of the Invisible Man reveals itself to him in an almost Heideggerian fashion, corroborates Walter Kaufmann's remarks several years later that the Underground Man embodied a luring "new voice."

This lure can also be seen in the fact that, like Ellison, Salinger relies on Dostoevsky in the opening scene more than anywhere else. The "new voice" acts as a sort of springboard for both authors to discover their own authorial voice, a procedure that involves smoothing out the

(dialogic) rough edges of Dostoevsky in order to render his work more readily subject to mimesis. *The Catcher in the Rye* famously opens with the following lines:

> If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father…Besides, I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy. (1)

Holden's apparent antagonism toward the reader, who doubles up as psychiatrists in the mental institution from which Holden writes, resembles the Underground Man's antagonism toward his imagined readers. Also like the Underground Man, Holden deliberately situates his narrative in the genre of confessional writing, although there are limits to how far he is willing to go: for one, because "that stuff bores" him, and two, because he respects his parents' privacy.

Less obviously, in this passage Salinger calls forth the same two opposing views on subjectivity found in Dostoevsky's work. We saw earlier in this chapter how in a footnote to the novella Dostoevsky underscores the Underground Man's consciousness of the social and cultural determinants that make his existence inevitable. This same consciousness, when compared with his subsequent insistence on freedom, constitutes the text's dialogic core. Well, Salinger's allusion to Charles Dicken's *David Copperfield* (1850) and, by extension, to the genre of the

Bildungsroman similarly elicits these different concepts of self. As Franco Moretti explains in *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987), a concern with "the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization" (15) is central to the aesthetics of the Bildungsroman. Even though the Bildungsroman presents a successful "fusion" (16) of this conflict, the clash of these distinct models of selfhood as "two large planes partially superimposed" makes up the "structure of the classical Bildungsroman" (17).

Unlike Dostoevsky, however, Salinger conjures up these models of subjectivity only to renounce determinism in favor of, if not pure autonomy, then its close relative: responsibility. He is thus only nominally faithful, as it were, to the literary form he borrows from Dostoevsky, as he effectively rejects dialogic structure along with determinism. As seen here, Holden makes known the existence of an independent will—the reader/psychiatrist trying to get him to tell of his ailments ("If you really want to hear about it")—whose interests he interprets to be at odds with his own. The supposed threat that the reader/psychiatrist poses to his autonomy is coterminous with the determinist vector of the "David Copperfield crap" (the Bildungsroman), which he would rather not discuss but which he knows the reader/psychiatrist would like to hear. And so, by asserting control over his narrative in this scene, Holden symbolically neutralizes threats posed by outside forces, thereby enabling responsibility. Even though he ends up telling his story, as his reader/psychiatrist wants him to do, the telling of the story takes place on his own terms.

The partial victory Holden gains by telling the story on his own terms is of a piece with a general tendency in his narrative not to acknowledge encroachments on freedom, no matter how patently obvious they are. As we will see, Holden strives whenever possible to fashion himself

and others as responsible, free agents, and so ideas like determinants, past trauma, and the like are anathema to him. Indeed, his decision not to narrate the past, with the exception of the "madmen stuff," in all likelihood comes not only from a lack of desire to do so or from a concern for his parents' privacy; it also arises from the all-too-real possibility that, if he did, the reader/psychologist might discover a detail therein which would cast him as less than fully responsible for present troubles. His brother Allie's death is just such an example. In the novel Allie stands for the unspoken trauma that makes the past so difficult for Holden to remember; he also explains much of the "madmen stuff." Another example of Holden's tendency to underestimate the role of external determinants comes on the following page, when he rejects the idea presented in an advertisement for his school Pencey that they "mold[…] boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men" (2). Instead, Holden claims that the boys "probably came to Pencey that way" (2).

Holden's conclusion here mirrors Salinger's depiction of personhood in general. In a clear departure from the Bildungsroman, Holden's character does not evolve over the course of the narrative but remains exactly the same. Of course, Allie's death has much to do with Holden's views on this account, too: if people cannot be molded and if they do not change, then they also do not—or so Holden would like to believe—die. The conclusion Holden therefore invariably draws is that people act in a world free of external determinants. If others are not as immune to advertisements as Holden shows himself to be while discussing the school's add— which is, Holden explains, "strictly for the birds"—then this is because they are somehow intrinsically "phony." Holden never makes the obvious connection between the phoniness that he witnesses in people, on the one hand, and the all-pervasive consumer-driven culture that he so frequently chastises on the other. As Abigail Cheever notes in *Real Phonies: Cultures of*

Authenticity in Post-World War II America (2010), the label "phony" refers in Salinger's novel

to a condition for which the bearer carries full responsibility (30).

While Holden would almost surely exempt himself from the phony category, he does not

exempt himself from carrying others burdens. Salinger gives explicit form to these burdens

through the analogy of the "catcher in the rye," a dream Holden has of saving young children

from falling off a cliff. As this analogy suggests, it is difficult to bear responsibility for that

which one cannot control; for this reason, Holden displays a disdain for things outside his control.

This can be seen in the very narrative form of the novel. "Where I want to start telling," Holden

begins the narrative proper, "is the day I left Pencey Prep" (2). In this crucial moment, Holden

asserts control over his narrative by delimiting its scope exclusively to those episodes and

memories that he feels he can control. Holden hereby establishes a parameter around the

narrative proper marking his domain of control, and in the process of doing so, he gives a

commentary on the nature of writing itself, likening it to the act of assuming responsibility for

the things one tells.

It is on account of this notion of writing-as-claiming-responsibility that a break occurs in

Holden's narrative, in his ability to narrate, when he encounters individuals who do not easily

fall into his typologies. Nietzsche, in outlining "the long history of the origins of responsibility,"

explains that the "particular task of breeding an animal which has the right to make a promise

includes…as precondition and preparation, the more immediate task of first making man to a

certain degree undeviating, uniform, a peer amongst peers, orderly and consequently predictable"

(*Genealogy of Morals* 39). The people Holden encounters are responsible because they are

predictable, because, more often than not, they fall into one of his categories—"phony," for

example. Although Holden rejects the notion that "breeding" (eerily reminiscent of the "molding"

above) of any kind is taking place, his narrative attests to the way that predictability goes hand in glove with responsibility, both the kind people bear and the kind he bears for them. On the few occasions when a person does not fall into his classification schema, there is a breakdown in the narrative. For instance, when the young prostitute, Sunny, undresses and asks Holden to hang up her dress, the image of her dress prompts Holden to imagine how Sunny had bought it without the salesman realizing she was a prostitute. "The salesman probably just thought she was a regular girl when she bought it" (96), Holden reasons. This realization disarms Holden in a profound way: "It made me feel sad as hell—I don't know why exactly" (96). The salesman's inability to perceive Sunny's secret represents for Holden a sort of unpredictability that emasculates him, both of his sense of responsibility and his libido. "Look," Holden tells her, "I don't feel very much like myself tonight" (96).

Importantly, Holden's capacity to claim responsibility for others is enabled not only by their predictability but also by the conspicuous disappearance of his father as an authority figure. In the context of *The Catcher in the Rye*, the absence of the father symbolizes the potential for added control or power and the likely increase in responsibility that goes with it. We must remember that Holden's sojourn around New York begins at the same time that he defers accepting responsibility before his parents for being kicked out of yet another school. "So what I decided to do," Holden explains of his decision to leave Pencey, "I decided I'd take a room in a hotel in New York—some very inexpensive hotel and all—and just take it easy till Wednesday. Then, on Wednesday, I'd go home all rested up and feeling swell" (51). In addition to the benefits of gaining a much-needed "vacation" (51)—"My nerves were shot," he writes—this plan will ensure that his parents have ample time to "digest" (51) the news of his being kicked out of his sixth consecutive school. It is not as if he defers this moment because he feels

someone else is to blame; on the contrary, Holden would readily admit his blame for present troubles. Yet there is something about the prospect of having to accept responsibility before his parents—i.e., authority—that Holden finds profoundly disquieting. The absence of his father thus enables Holden to bear responsibility for others in the first place. Salinger thus juxtaposes two notions of responsibility. On the one side, Holden is responsible before and to various authorities, particularly school officials and his parents; on the other, Salinger provides an important counterpoint to Holden's responsibility before authority figures in his feelings of responsibility for people, often complete strangers.

Chapter 4

"Calling into the void for help that will never come": Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and

Dispersal of Responsibility

"On Compensatory Forms of Relief"

Reflecting on the name of Willy Loman in his autobiography *Timebends* (1987), Arthur Miller

writes: "In later years I found it discouraging to observe the confidence with which some

commentators on *Death of a Salesman* smirked at the heavy-handed symbolism of 'Low-man.'

What the name really meant to me was a terror-stricken man calling into the void for help that

will never come" (179). Miller's description of Willy "calling into the void for help" is

intriguing when one considers the fact that Willy does not do a great deal of "calling" in the play,

least of all for "help."

One possible exception occurs in the scene where Willy finally works up the courage to

confront his boss, Howard, to ask that he be accommodated with a sales position in New York,

since his declining health and physical exhaustion have made it all but impossible for him to

travel the New England countryside. Still, Willy himself characterizes this not as a call for help

but as a demand for *appreciation*. In comparing Howard with his late father, who founded the

company and made Willy "promises" (61) that his successor-son is wont to forget, Willy points

out how, in contrast to his father, Howard does not "appreciate" (4). A close parallel to what

Willy terms appreciation here can be found in his wife Linda's famous call for *attention*. Trying

to impart a sense of the dire situation that Willy faces to their two sons, Linda pleas that, "he's a

human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person" (40).

In Saul Bellow's 1956 novella *Seize the Day* a similarly ill-fated protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm, longs for *sympathy* from a father who is loath to give it. Unable to obtain sympathy from his father, Tommy turns to others for sympathy. Bellow's sympathy smacks of Miller's appreciation and attention; in fact, the terms are virtually synonymous. Both sympathy and appreciation/attention stand for *compensatory* forms of help or relief. As I shall explain below, these forms of help are compensatory because they cannot be rendered by a collective body or state but, rather, by members of a community (e.g., friends, family members, or peers), often in an attempt to compensate for the lack of other forms of help. Even though compensatory help invariably falls short of what is requisite for proper relief from a given situation, it represents a last-resort option for desperate people like Willy and Tommy who recognize on at least some level the unavailability of state-backed relief. In the next two chapters, we will examine the presence of compensatory emotions or affects in the work of Miller and Bellow and in midcentury American culture more generally. Together, these works mark a shift away from the at times celebratory stage of antistatism seen in the previous chapter, toward a verifiable discontent with the diminished role of the postwar state. In any properly dialectical account of subjectivity, remnants of previous states are implicit in new ones; therefore, it is reasonable to imagine that compensatory forms of relief contain within them a kernel of the state-backed relief they displaced. To the extent that this kernel implicitly reveals the inadequacy of compensatory forms of help, it can be said to contain a critique of postwar antistatism. The remaining chapters will focus on this kernel of discontent implicit in postwar writings about guilt.

A good deal of discontent can be discerned in Arthur Miller's characterization of Willy Loman above, and one does not get the sense that Miller has compensatory forms of help in mind when he says that Willy is "calling into the void for help that will never come." Of course, Willy is right on account of Howard's inability to appreciate; it comes as no surprise when Howard refuses to give Willy an appropriate position for his age and instead fires the long-time employee. But the "help that will never come" does not refer to Howard. If it did, then it would not be true to say that this sort of help will never come, namely because Charley, Willy's loyal neighbor and friend, loans him money almost weekly so he can pretend to Linda that he is earning a salary. He already has, then, the type of help one might think of when it comes to compensatory forms, notwithstanding Linda's exhortations on the need for attention from his sons. For this reason, I wish to propose that what Willy calls for is help of a more fundamental kind. The "void" he calls into is the postwar American state.

Mobilization for World War Two brought the nation out of the Depression, which had dragged on for more than a decade. The speed of the economic recovery made it seem as though there was little need for New Deal relief programs like WPA, CCC, FERA, or CWA. All of these programs were liquidated by the early 1940s as part of an attack on New Deal programs. Despite these setbacks, liberals remained hopeful that as soon as the war ended Roosevelt would revive New Deal initiatives. Even after Roosevelt's death, Harry Truman's words and actions initially gave observers reason to believe that the new president would re-establish programs for those in need. Vowing to support Roosevelt's legacy, Truman proposed ambitious social reforms, such as a full employment bill, a higher minimum wage, a measure designed to provide better federal aid to farmers, an anti-lynching bill, a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, and housing legislation. At least for the time being, liberals looked with

anticipation to the future. As historian William Chafe points out, Chester Bowles's *Tomorrow Without Fear* (1946) captures the spirit of this period. Bowles tried to predict what the future would look like if America followed Roosevelt's policies. Almost utopian in his vision of the future, Bowles avows the importance of government support for "full production and full employment" (Chafe 77) as a panacea for all potential ills. Bowles's hopeful views, and those of many liberals, were soon hampered by a succession of blows to Truman's reform proposals. The Full Employment Act was the first major setback. As many of its original provisions came under conservative attack, the bill was diluted of its most ambitious content; original terms like "full employment," for example, became "maximum employment." The fate of the Full Employment Act provides a rough outline of how these matters would be resolved for some time to come.

Liberal attempts to get legislation passed were further stymied by a proliferation of antistatist sentiments. Historian Benjamin Alpers, for example, explains how during and after World War Two totalitarianism became associated not so much with "mass movements" as with "a small leadership group in charge of an all-powerful state" (252). From the mid-1940s onward, social reforms and other state-sponsored measures were often seen as indicative of dangerous tendencies almost certain to lead America down the totalitarian path. This narrative can be discerned in Sinclair Lewis's political satire *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), and it finds more direct expression in later works, such as James Burnham's 1941 best-seller *The Managerial Revolution* and Friedrich A. Hayek's even more influential 1944 *The Road to Serfdom*. These latter works, in particular, trumpet antistatist sentiments by drawing comparisons between America during the New Deal and its totalitarian counterparts in Europe. All of which is to say that the "void" Miller alludes to was an eminently real one.

This period of resurgent antistatism witnessed the rise of a preoccupation in intellectual circles with the idea that freedom for the subject was scarcely attainable. Observers like Burnham, Hayek, and others had been warning for some time that statism poses an inevitable threat to personal liberty, but it was in fact against the backdrop of postwar antistatism that American intellectuals became skeptical of freedom. Influential works such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* (1951), and William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) all attest to the decreasing autonomy of the subject. Paradoxically, whereas it has been widely accepted as axiomatic that a decrease in autonomy implies a concomitant decrease in responsibility, authors exhibit a preoccupation with protagonists who feel profoundly responsible even as they are cognizant of their lack of autonomy. Perhaps Dwight Macdonald summarizes this existential state most aptly in an article, appropriately titled "The Responsibility of Peoples," where he explains how

> The common peoples of the world are coming to have less and less control over the policies of "their" governments, while at the same time they are being more and more closely identified with those governments. Or to state it in slightly different terms: as the common man's moral responsibility diminishes…, his practical responsibility increases. Not for many centuries have individuals been at once so powerless to influence what is done by the national collectivities to which they belong, and at the same time so generally held responsible for what is done by those collectivities. (71)

Although the article begins as a reflection on the responsibility borne by the German people for Nazi crimes, it soon devolves, as we see here, into a reflection on the responsibility of peoples more generally. For this reason, it is tempting to read the passage as equally apposite to

America's domestic politics, a reading that seems appropriate in light of the fact that Macdonald at one point draws a parallel between Stalin and Roosevelt (58). At least in the case of America, however, the views that Macdonald articulates above become most relevant not under Roosevelt but under subsequent administrations. Macdonald's message could hardly ring more true in the context of postwar American literature, in which one encounters several notable protagonists who are not responsible in the "moral" sense, to borrow Macdonald's terms, but who are responsible in the "practical" one.

Authors capture these ideas in scenes where characters either behave or feel tempted to behave immorally in spite of themselves. J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield, perhaps the most famous responsible character of this time, concludes at one point while viewing a scene of sexual perversity in *The Catcher in the Rye* that:

> The trouble was that kind of junk is sort of fascinating to watch, even if you don't want it to be…I mean that's my big trouble. In my mind, I'm probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw. Sometimes I can think of very crumby stuff I wouldn't mind doing if the opportunity came up. I can even see how it might be quite a lot of fun, in a crumby way, and if you were both sort of drunk and all…The thing is, though, I don't like the idea. It stinks, if you analyze it. (62)

More than merely an articulation of Holden's experience of temptation or something of that sort, this scene dramatizes the basic moral dilemma faced by many characters of the fifties. In emphasizing both the allure and the repulsion Holden experiences while viewing himself viewing this scene, Salinger stages the moment when Holden implicitly acknowledges the forces—internal and external alike—that threaten his autonomy (encapsulated here by the element of temptation), even as he realizes that, should he succumb to his urges, he will

nevertheless bear full responsibility. This is the "trouble." No matter how much Holden's

narrative serves as an index of the confluence of various forces bearing down on him, this does

not absolve him of responsibility in any way; on the contrary, he fashions himself as a sort of

"messiah," or "catcher in the rye," responsible for catching kids before they fall off a cliff.

Miller and Bellow sketch remarkably similar scenes of temptation. There is a moment in

Death of a Salesman when Happy tells Biff about his habit of "ruining" women betrothed to men

who pose a threat to his upward mobility. "I don't know what gets into me," Happy explains,

"maybe I just have an overdeveloped sense of competition or something" (14). He then draws

comparisons between his sexual indiscretions and other misdeeds: "Like I'm not supposed to

take bribes. Manufacturers offer me a hundred-dollar bill now and then to throw an order their

way. You know how honest I am, but it's like this girl, see. I hate myself for it. Because I don't

want the girl, and, still, I take it and—I love it!" (14) Unlike Holden, Happy reluctantly

embraces the unintended delights accompanying moral transgressions. Because these

transgressions are not willed, he simultaneously accepts responsibility ("I hate myself for it") and

denies any compromises to his integrity ("you know how honest I am"). *Seize the Day*'s Tommy

Wilhelm discovers a comparable pattern in his decision-making. Knowing the "risks" and a

"hundred reasons" against something, he inevitably does it all the same. "This was typical of

Wilhelm. After much thought and hesitation and debate he invariably took the course he had

rejected innumerable times. Ten such decision made up the history of his life" (19). As different

as these scenes may be, they illuminate these protagonists' essentially absurd position of

powerlessness *and* responsibility, which arises from their understanding that what they do (or

ponder doing) is wrong but that they are unable fully to abstain from it.

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This brings me to my central point. Given the subject's basic position of powerlessness and responsibility—a position brought about, as we shall see in what follows, by the government's unwillingness to provide relief or help as in times past—it becomes necessary to re-envision the very concept of help. Miller and Bellow offer much insight into how this takes place. "Appreciation" and "sympathy" are examples of the compensatory relief or help to which subjects turn who, by this same act, tacitly acknowledge that they are at once powerless to change their condition in any fundamental way and responsible for it. Friedrich Nietzsche describes in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) how the slave revolt in morality begins with feelings of "ressentiment," which help prompt slaves to "compensate" for the revenge they desire but know they cannot have with "imaginary revenge" (21). In much the same way, individuals resort to appreciation and sympathy in an attempt to compensate for the lack of more fundamental forms of help. And just as the slave revolt is not really a "revolt" at all since it merely renders slaves passive, so, too, does turning to compensatory forms of relief connote the unlikelihood of securing adequate help. This is so because, at bottom, compensatory forms of help reflect not just the diminished role of the postwar state but also the diminishing expectations of individuals.

As despondent as Willy and this situation may appear, there is no need to give up all hope, at least not yet. Miller's phrase, "calling into a void for help that will never come," takes on added meaning when considered in the dialectical manner mentioned in passing above. Even though Willy does not do any active "calling" in the play—his calling is, we might say, more silent than vocal—this does not mean that he cannot be heard. The reason Willy's calling can be heard lies in the very notion of compensatory forms of help: implicit in these forms is the lacking (original) object for which "appreciation," "sympathy," and the like are supposed to compensate.

The inadequacy of compensatory forms of help (i.e., the "void") evokes on at least one level a more fundamental sort of help, which is what Willy really desires. For all the reminiscing Willy and others do in *Death of a Salesman*, it is therefore relevant that no explicit references are made to the 1930s or the New Deal, a time when more comprehensive forms of help were available. Thus Miller renders the "void" all the more real and palpable: most memories in the play come from the time preceding the thirties, namely from 1928, which is when Willy had a red Chevvy (he sees himself driving this in one of his daydreams) and when he had a good year in sales. Other memorable events, such as Ben's moving to Alaska or Willy's beginning to work for Howard's father, take place much earlier. Still, we learn elsewhere that Willy and Linda have "weathered a twenty five year mortgage." This means that they purchased their house in 1924 and made it through the roughest years of the Depression, but we hear no details about the intervening period. There is, in other words, a literal void in the text when it comes to the 1930s, the Depression, the New Deal, and the extensive relief efforts of that decade.

Before moving on to an in-depth discussion of *Death of a Salesman*, I wish to make a few general remarks about Miller's and Bellow's texts. *Death of a Salesman* and *Seize the Day* highlight not only the added sense of responsibility individuals inherit when the state disavows its duties to the poor and underprivileged but also the ways these same political developments give rise to markedly different family and social dynamics. In one revealing scene in *Seize the Day*, Tommy Wilhelm reflects on people whom he knows and concludes that "every other man spoke a language entirely his own, which he had figured out by private thinking; he had his own ideas and peculiar ways" (79). There is a breakdown in language and the ability to communicate with others in the atomized society that Tommy describes here; a certain amount of uniformity and structure is necessary, Bellow implicitly suggests, for human relations to function in a

mutually beneficial manner. In this regard, the world Bellow portrays is not a far cry from the one in which Willy Loman calls into a void for help that will never come. Both Miller and Bellow imply that radical antistatist sentiments—like those underpinning the societies they portray—promise little more than a world of ambiguity, in which basic human relations are virtually impossible. What may seem the ultimate fantasy of Cold War liberals who cling to the tenet of personal liberty includes the notable downside of creating a world dominated by chaos and entropy. As Tommy concludes in this same scene, "the fathers were no fathers and the sons no sons" (80).

The conclusion Tommy reaches in this moment can be taken quite literally. When fathers are overcome with feelings of responsibility, it has a way of seeping into personal life. In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy transforms from a proponent of self-making who is concerned about his own success into a father who is concerned about the well being and success of his son, Biff. Perhaps all fathers are to some extent interested in seeing their sons successful, but in the case of Willy, this becomes an obsession and is un-fatherly in that it smothers and oppresses. Miller drives this point home by juxtaposing the Loman father-son relationship with that of their neighbors, Charley and his son Bernard. Charley feels little of the responsibility for Bernard that Willy does for Biff, and Miller clearly condones this latter father-son relationship because Bernard—unlike Biff—achieves success.

In *Seize the Day* there are also two models of father-son relationships. On the one side, Tommy Wilhelm takes on responsibility for his sons much as Willy Loman does, though on markedly different terms. Tommy's estranged wife badgers him for undue financial support (he pays for her tuition to study and then she refuses to work) and sets his two sons against him, and he continues to send her money, realizing full well that this is causing him physical, financial,

and psychological "destruction" (110). On the other side, Tommy's father, Dr. Adler, provides a counterpoint to Willy Loman and Tommy Wilhelm. Whereas Tommy readily assumes the burden of providing for his sons and ex-wife, Dr. Adler abjures responsibility for anything more than advice to his son. Tommy is, of course, greatly disquieted by this, explaining to his father at one point that "it isn't all a question of money—there are other things a father can give to a son" (106). The most important of these "other things a father can give to a son" is sympathy, something Tommy demands from his father time and again but does not receive. Although sympathy does not entail money, Tommy requests monetary assistance from his father on numerous occasions. Dr. Adler's final remarks to Tommy are unequivocal: "I'm too old to take on new burdens," he says, "You want to make yourself into my cross. But I am not going to pick up a cross. I'll see you dead, Wilky, by Christ, before I let you do that to me" (106). Rebuffs like these of his son's pleas for sympathy have led many critics to condemn Dr. Adler. This reaction seems a bit harsh. For just as Biff is not accustomed to the domineering attention that Willy devotes to him, Dr. Adler is not accustomed to the idea of taking on the "burdens" of his adult son. Dr. Adler, a self-made man who happens to be Jewish, grew up during a time when Jews were still considered outsiders in American society, and so he naturally takes pride in his upward mobility. Dr. Adler "lived in an entirely different world from his son's" (7), Bellow writes. As Dr. Adler at one point mentions himself, "I uphold tradition. He's [Tommy] for the new" (11). Bellow's juxtaposition of these different models of fatherhood thus serves the important function of highlighting the "new" generation's increased burden.

"Memory, the Personal, and (Not) Knowing the System"

In the opening scene of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman returns home after smashing up his car in what has become something of a regular occurrence. Exhausted from a life of toil that has rendered surprisingly little fruit—except carrots he is seen planting at the play's conclusion—the sixty-three-year old salesman is transfixed by the idea of killing himself so that his family can collect benefits from his insurance. Although his wife Linda knows these are not fortuitous crashes but rather deliberate attempts to commit suicide, she helps him save face by attributing this most recent accident to external causes. "Maybe it was the steering again," she proffers, "I don't think Angelo knows the Studebaker" (3); "maybe it's your glasses," she adds. Willy's replies—"No, it's me, it's me"; "No, I see everything" (3)—to each of his wife's suggestions are noteworthy because they mark one of the few instances in the text when he explicitly claims responsibility for ailments.

Otherwise, Willy seldom passes up an opportunity to deny, reject, or repress feelings of guilt and blame. His denials of wrongdoing certainly stand out the most: when confronted with the idea that his tacit approval of Biff's stealing in the past led to Biff's habit of stealing, Willy dubiously claims, "I never in my life told him anything but decent things" (27). Upon learning of Biff's failure to secure a loan, Willy interprets the unwelcome news as an accusation. "Don't blame everything on me!" Willy erupts, "I didn't flunk math—you did!" (86) Similarly, when Biff finally confronts his father with the "truth" (104), which is that he, Biff, is simply a failure, Willy defensively rejects responsibility for his son's lack of success: "I want you to know…that you cut down your life for spite!…Spite, spite, is the word of your undoing!…When you're rotting somewhere beside the railroad tracks, remember, and don't you dare blame it on me!" (103) In light of these and other subsequent attempts to repudiate culpability, then, the opening

scene serves the important function of establishing how Willy's "calling into the void for help that will never come" leaves him, perforce, with no one to blame but himself.

His numerous rejections of blame merely obfuscate the degree to which, on a different level, Willy is capable of little besides assuming full responsibility for both his and Biff's failures. In this regard, the opening exchange between Willy and Linda stands as a microcosm of the work as a whole. Above all else *Death of a Salesman* is a quest for answers to the question of what ails Willy; it is his personal quest for answers to this question. In an essay titled "Tragedy and the Common Man," Miller describes the tragedy of the play as coming out of Willy's willingness "to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity" (*The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* 4). The project of securing personal dignity involves what Miller terms "man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly" (4). Miller identifies a breed of individuals who do not "remain passive in the face of…a challenge to [their] dignity" but who, instead, "act against the scheme of things that degrades them, and in the process of action everything we have accepted out of fear or insensitivity or ignorance is shaken before us and examined" (4). "From this total questioning of what has been previously unquestioned, we learn" (4).

Thus Miller casts Willy's project as a seemingly successful attempt to transcend his immediate identity in the name of judging himself impartially and objectively. Yet one may just as well conclude that the process of introspection Miller describes here is as much the cause of his loss of "dignity" as the means by which he "learns" anything. Much as we saw in the previous chapter, there is a fine line between a healthy dose of introspection and self-criticism and what in midcentury American letters was an unhealthy, and morbid, negation of self. Willy certainly fails in several respects when it comes to "learning" from his "questioning of what has

been previously unquestioned." For one, he seems completely incompetent for the task. Several blatant contradictions in the things he says support this conclusion, as do the few off the mark answers he actually proffers. Even though America, for instance, is "the greatest country in the world" (6), Willy explains, on the next page, that "what's ruining this county" is "there's more people!…Population is getting out of control" (7). For another, Willy remains so fixated on the past—and his guilt over it—that he cannot incorporate lessons gleaned therefrom into his present reality. Miller has characters freely traverse wall lines to signify the events that took place in the past. This dramatic technique underscores not only the fluidity of past and present but also Willy's inability to escape the specter of his own past: in several moments, he is seen reliving past discussions while conversing with present acquaintances. To suggest that Willy "evaluates" the past in an even remotely objective or "just" manner would be a gross overstatement; he seems at once disinclined and incapable of doing so. Miller's comments elsewhere on the subject come close to acknowledging this shortcoming of the text: "I feel that Willy Loman lacks sufficient insight into this situation, which would have made him a greater, more significant figure" (*Conversations* 26). Miller writes: "A point has to arrive where man sees what has happened to him" (26).

This point never arrives. Nor is Willy the only one who lacks perspective enough to evaluate the world. While Linda only pretends to know less than she does in the opening scene, her feigned confusion over the cause of Willy's accidents mirrors her authentic confusion over other questions, and both typify the way characters in *Death of a Salesman* are so often in the dark concerning the sources of their woes. Of course, this lack of "sufficient insight" plays a profound role in the main conflict of the play between Willy and Biff, since that conflict revolves around an incident—Willy's infidelity to his wife—to which only these two characters are privy.

As a result neither Linda nor Happy, who would much like to see an end to the hostility, has the wherewithal to make an accurate judgment about who is the responsible party in this father-son quarrel. Happy ascribes his father's pensiveness to Biff's floundering, to the fact that his brother is "not settled" and "kind of up in the air" (10). "He just wants you to make good, that's all" (10), Happy reasons. Though Happy's hypothesis happens to be partially true, Biff's reply, "there's one or two other things depressing him, Happy" (10), intimates the privileged knowledge that he has over his brother. Linda, on the other hand, holds Biff accountable, going so far as accusing her son of being ungrateful to the father who "put his whole life into [him]" (43). "Biff, I swear to God! Biff, his life is in your hands!" (43) Linda explains. The contrast that emerges between those (relatively few) who know for sure and those who are limited to conjecture constitutes a key aspect of the play's dramatic tension. Without knowing for sure, one runs the risk of misattributing responsibility, to oneself or to others.

The dearth of "sufficient insight" that epitomizes Miller's character depictions in *Death of a Salesman* and the various thematics arising out of these depictions call to mind a narrative in vogue in intellectual circles around this time. As the bureaucratic and economic structures of modern industrial society reached new levels in postwar America, in part thanks to burgeoning corporations, many intellectuals presented modern society as advanced and convoluted to the point that it was no longer possible to dole out responsibility and blame. Without understanding the totality, followers of this view suggested, how could one even begin to ascribe responsibility to the parts? One of the most well-known intellectuals to embrace this view was Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in his now-canonical *The Vital Center*, published the same year as Miller's play. Schlesinger outlines the emergence of an "impersonal" system or "code" aimed at "cop[ing] with the remote and statistical units of the modern economy" (4). Not only driven by economic and

managerial considerations but also by an impulse to "solve moral…problems" (5), this new "elaborate and comprehensive" (5) system serves in Schlesinger's model as the "instrumentality through which moral man could indulge his natural weakness for immoral deeds" (5). This "instrumentality" hinges on a collective incapacity or lack of willpower to understand ever more complex societal structures, thus making it so that "no one had to feel a direct responsibility for the obvious and terrible costs in human suffering" (5). An array of critics have echoed views much akin to Schlesinger's ever since.

In a recent reading of D. A. Miller's essay on Dickens's *Bleak House*, Bruce Robbins concludes that the "infinite richness of reality" means the following:

> The truth about responsibility is that it is dependent on too many other people, too many interlocking histories, many of them invisible to any single observer. Only some callously impersonal, many-headed collectivity could even be imagined marshaling the breadth and diversity of vision necessary to see how complex any given case of responsibility is and allow a final finger to be pointed. (90)

Interestingly, while Schlesinger and Robbins espouse a more or less similar view on the complexity of the social system and how this confuses attempts to assign responsibility, they diverge sharply in the conclusions they deduce from this dynamic. In each case, the inability to assign blame leads to what Robbins calls a "dispersal of responsibility" (89)—exactly the words Mary McCarthy uses in *The Company She Keeps*, as discussed in Chapter One—whereby everyone in a social group assumes a share of the collective burden. For Schlesinger, however, the act of dispersing responsibility enables certain individuals to indulge in dishonorable deeds with relative impunity, since responsibility for all acts has been effectively diffused among the community. This situation inspires in turn the awakening of what Schlesinger, borrowing from

Reinhold Niebuhr, whose work bears an imprint on many pages of *The Vital Center*, believes is a universal human inclination for "immoral deeds." Schlesinger's views therefore reflect the cynical outlook on human nature characteristic of midcentury political culture. Robbins, on the other hand, is not nearly so pessimistic. In fact, Robbins sees this same "dispersal of responsibility" as standing behind the push for a more democratic society: "this dispersal of responsibility," Robbins says, "is just what citizens had to be convinced of in order to divert their resources into rescuing society's less fortunate members from what had previously been seen as the results of their own actions and inactions" (89). For Robbins, then, diffusing responsibility is a positive development, since it gives rise to a welfarist sensibility.

There can be little doubt as to the truth contained in Schlesinger's and Robbins's observations regarding the complex nature of the economic system and how this has made the task of assigning blame all the more onerous; this does not mean, however, that we should give up the task altogether or that we should close our eyes to the patently true point that some are guiltier than others (and some more innocent). Of all the characters discussed thus far, this applies most directly to Richard Wright's Fred Daniels. It is difficult not to find Wright's depiction of an oppressed African-American man accepting blame and responsibility for the crimes of his white oppressors—and for humanity in general—both logically tenuous and morally repulsive. But a similar argument can be made on behalf of a middle-aged white man like Willy Loman who, though not oppressed on grounds of race and by no means innocent of wrongdoing himself, is incapable of seeing how forces decidedly beyond his control have had a significant enough share in his undoing so as to render his complete blame of self misguided and overly-harsh.

As seen in almost every book considered above, the process of diffusing responsibility, or, in Miller's terms, the process whereby an individual is deprived of the capacity to evaluate himself "justly," leads almost invariably to disastrous consequences for the self. Rather than inspiring a reign of evil deeds without compunction (per Schlesinger) or a welfarist sensibility (per Robbins), this process encourages some individuals—the Pflaumens, the Fred Daniels, the Holdens, and even ex-Communists—to skewer themselves unjustifiably, precisely because the dispersal of responsibility has eviscerated the real culprits and put new (at least partially innocent) ones in their place. Willy Loman is yet another case in point. Miller provides evidence of the ways external determinants have shaped Willy's life: over the years his and Linda's plot of land, for example, has been hedged in on all sides by an urban environment growing around it. Yet Willy seems mostly unaware of the reality that surrounds him, and so he has little place to turn in his quest for the source of his woes—financial, moral, and psychological alike—other than to his personal past.

In an early assessment of Miller's work, Raymond Williams claims that "the most important single fact about the plays of Arthur Miller is that he has brought back into the theatre, in an important way, the drama of social questions" (140). "The key to social realism," Williams goes on to explain, "lies in a particular conception of the relationship of the individual to society, in which neither is the individual seen as a unit nor the society as an aggregate, but both are seen as belonging to a continuous and in real terms inseparable process" (141). According to Williams, Miller's successful implementation of these principles into his work makes him a harbinger of a "new or newly-recovered way of social thinking" (141). Williams's assessment here falls short in several respects. On the face of it, yes, the play deals with social issues inasmuch as Willy can be said to typify, in Williams terms, the alienated worker or false

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consciousness (145). But this reading overlooks the way Willy's constant mining of the past clouds as much as it elucidates the relationship of the individual to society; it also neglects the way in which Miller himself falls victim to Willy's confusion. To justify the claim that *Death of a Salesman* is concerned with false consciousness, one would need to reveal within the play itself the existence of a perspective capable of showing Willy's to be "false," yet the play is devoid of any such perspective. Even the term "false consciousness" can be misleading, for Willy's is a specific kind of misguidedness: he has internalized the view that individuals are powerless to penetrate the complexity of social and economic structures. Without "sufficient insight into his situation," he turns to his past as the sole domain in which answers to the question of his ailment can be found.

In this way, Miller does not simply fail to show how the individual and the social are part of an "inseparable process"; he eviscerates the social altogether. The social enters into Willy's consciousness and, more generally, into the play itself only as an indistinguishable and mysterious force that has been almost wholly collapsed into the personal (namely, his personal past). For this reason, the social appears in the play as more of a specter than anything else. Whereas Williams argues that false consciousness is "being broken into by real consciousness, in actual life and relationships" (145), just the opposite is true. The play remains transfixed on Willy's perspective, in particular, on his misguided sense of responsibility for both his and his son's failures. There may be some overlap between this and what Williams calls "false consciousness," but this does not change how Williams significantly overstates the role of the social. Because the past confronts Willy as the only possible domain in which the answer to his (social) condition lies, he lives and dies in a state of utter bewilderment. As Willy walks off to commit suicide so his son can collect on his insurance policy, a phantasmal image of his self-

made brother Ben coaxes him to go forth, confirming that Willy sees his suicide as a way to get Biff ahead of Bernard and to reestablish the "streak of self-reliance" (60) in the Loman family. The errors in his judgment, and in his abiding dream of self-making, are obvious enough. Less obvious, though, is the way in which Willy's dream of self-making has morphed into a preoccupation with self-sacrifice, placing him in the tradition of responsible selfhood under investigation here. Notably, his final sacrifice is atonement not merely for mistakes allegedly made before his son or wife but for wrongs that society has committed against him. The final irony here is that he has placed his hopes for atonement in an institution, private insurance, devised for the purpose of dispersing responsibility.

That there were more guilty parties involved in Willy's failure and death is an almost self-evident truism, if for no other reason than because when we consider the few answers Willy comes up with in reviewing past mistakes, it is impossible to construe these faults, either individually or collectively, as sufficient cause of his present strife. Take his first main regret: not going to Alaska with his brother, Ben. We learn that Ben recently passed away in Africa; thus, his presence in the play is limited to Willy's memories of him. In general, Ben appears more apparitional and ghost-like than real. He speaks, as Bert Cardullo points out, "like nothing but a symbol" (330). According to Willy, there is little mystery to Ben's success. "The man knew what he wanted and went out and got it!" Willy explains to Happy, "Walked into a jungle, and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and he's rich!" (28) A specter of what might have been—as Willy realizes, "if I'd gone with him to Alaska that time, everything would've been totally different" (31)—Ben embodies not just the "streak of self-reliance in our family" (60) that Willy prides himself on but also Willy's own chance to have achieved success. The very fact that Willy depends so much on his brother for success, however, subverts this missed opportunity's

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potential as an instance of "self-reliance" for Willy. Moreover, it is worth noting that Ben's

escapades invariably take place in far-off locales, Alaska and Africa. This important detail

reveals how even for Ben the dream of self-making is no longer viable in America, which had by

now transformed, as C. Wright Mills suggests in *White Collar*, from a nation of entrepreneurs to

one of white-collar workers.

In part under the influence of Linda's promptings, Willy refuses to go with his brother

and instead decides to make a go of things working as a salesman in a firm that has promised

him a bright future. Not just concerned about himself, Willy justifies his decision by explaining

to Ben the prospects that Biff faces should they remain in the city:

> without a penny to his name, three great universities are begging for him, and from
>
> there the sky's the limit, because it's not what you do, Ben. It's who you know
>
> and the smile on your face! It's contacts, Ben, contacts!…that's the wonder, the
>
> wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of
>
> being liked! (65-66)

No matter how much Willy wishes to fashion himself as a paragon of self-reliance, utterances

like this one make it plain that the time of this age-old American tradition has come and gone,

much as Ben comes and goes. The tradition of self-reliance lingers on in Willy's imagination,

but it has clearly been displaced in reality by a new model of selfhood, which we shall return to

in a moment. Just as Willy collapses complex social forces into his personal past, his character

embodies various historical moments that live side by side in him. As Christopher Bigsby notes

in an introduction to the play, "*Death of a Salesman* is not set during the Depression but it bears

its mark, as does Willy Loman…Certainly in memory he returns to that period, as if personal and

national fate were somehow intertwined, while in spirit, according to Miller, he also reaches

back to the more expansive and confident, if empty, 1920s…" (vii) Thus, by giving form to a

medley of historical periods in Willy, Miller casts his character as a survivor of past generations,

overrun and outnumbered by the present one.

The experience of Willy's sons, Happy and Biff, further highlights the extent to which

the nation had done away with dreams of past generations. Even though Happy—in contrast to

his brother—has achieved some "success" (11), he is still not satisfied because he has exhausted

his potential for upward mobility, unless, of course, the "merchandise manager" dies (12). While

Willy's original dreams of success included owning his own business (18), Happy's ambitions

are limited to the more modest goal of moving up the corporate ladder. The reconfiguration of

ambitions implicit in this father-son comparison exemplify developments taking place in

American culture more broadly. From James Burnham's *Managerial Revolution* (1941) to

David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) to Mills's *White Collar* (1951), commentators

perspicaciously noted social, psychological, and behavioral effects of the workforce's transition

to white-collar and managerial work. These effects crop up throughout Miller's play. Even

Biff's experience, however different it is from Happy's, attests to the severely diminished

availability of non-white-collar work. After leaving home sometime before World War Two,

Biff worked "twenty or thirty different kinds of jobs" (11); like many white-collar jobs, they

were all equally dismal. Biff explains:

> Shipping clerk, salesman, business of one kind or another. And it's a measly
>
> manner of existence. To get on that subway on the hot mornings in summer. To
>
> devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or
>
> buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation,
>
> when all you really desire is to be outdoors, with your shirt off. (10-11)

By desiring to be outdoors and close to nature, Biff calls to mind a form of rugged individualism the likes of which his father dreams. As we can see here, however, Biff's reinvented individualism is above all else a rejection of white-collar work and consumer culture.

Willy reflects these changing realities as much as his sons. That he unintentionally and unwittingly gave up the ideal of self-making for something else is evident, as I said a moment ago, in the reasoning he gives for not following Ben. By suggesting that, "it's not what you do" but rather "who you know and the smile on your face," in short, it's "being liked," Willy departs from the model of self-making. Of course, this model breaks down by the end of the play, as Willy is lowered to the point that he must ask his trusty neighbor Charley for charity. Because a remnant of the dream if not the reality of self-reliance persists in Willy, he cannot accept the job that Charley offers him along with the money. Still, there is little even of the dream left at this point. As Charley points out toward the end of the play when Willy yet again professes his belief in the merits of being "well liked" (75), "why must everybody like you? Who liked J. P. Morgan?" (75) Here Charley refers to character traits of self-made men like J. P. Morgan, who tended to conform to what David Riesman in the *The Lonely Crowd* describes as "inner-directed" personality, meaning that they defined for themselves their agenda, irrespective of what others thought about them. Willy's preoccupation with being well liked falls under Riesman's category of "other-directed" personality.

The so-called "other-directed" character traits provide the bedrock on which corporate bureaucracies sustain themselves and their workforce. In a book that shares much in common with Riesman's, C. Wright Mills's *White Collar*, the author identifies a certain "white-collar way" (263), in which the "shift from a liberal capitalism of small properties to a corporate system of

monopoly capitalism" (262) underwrites changing views of workplace virtues. According to new mores regulating conduct at work, there remains a focus on personal virtues,

> but they are not the sober virtues once imputed to successful entrepreneurs. Now the stress is on agility rather than ability, on 'getting along' in a context of associates, superiors, and rules, rather than 'getting ahead' across and open market; on who you know rather than what you know; on techniques of self-display and the generalized knack of handling people, rather than on moral integrity, substantive accomplishments, and solidity of person; on loyalty to, or even identity with, one's own firm, rather than entrepreneurial virtuosity. (263)

The imperative Mills describes to get along, to be an agile team player, appears in *Death of a Salesman* as the inauthenticity Happy observes in his co-workers, whom he describes as "common," "petty," and "false" (12). No longer concerned with internal life of "virtue" or "moral integrity," Happy's co-workers worry instead about garnering affirmation from others with empty gestures of "self-display" and thus are incapable of enjoying success even after they achieve it (12). Biff's abnegation of values prevalent in the modern workforce therefore portends his lack of success as much as anything else, just as it also makes him, ironically enough, the closest thing in the play to an advocate for "inner-directed" personality.

The reason why I mention larger global and social developments like these is because they point to the overwhelming role that external determinants—economic, social, and cultural alike—have played in Willy's life. It is easy to lose sight of this dimension of the play because Willy collapses these determinants, along with most everything else, into the personal. In so doing, he makes a necessary psychological maneuver of sorts that effectively recasts not only his past but all that has been folded into it as willed, as somehow in his control. His feelings of

responsibility and guilt depend on this process. *Death of a Salesman* is a commentary on the effects of internalizing the view that economic and social systems are too complicated for assigning guilt and on the concomitant diffusion of responsibility this view instantiates. What obtains from this sort of "dispersal of responsibility," both here and in Mary McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps*,[24] are inflated feelings of responsibility in individuals who take on far more than their fair share of the collective burden. And so, as a result of this Willy's field of vision does not expand far enough to see how he has no control, for example, over the fact that his company of thirty four years recently transitioned him to commission in an effort to cut costs. Despite all the evidence suggesting his powerlessness—his house has literally been hedged into its current location by the emergence of high-rises on all sides—Willy identifies several moments when his willed actions led, or so he believes, to present troubles. His decision not to follow Ben is but one example.

More importantly still, Willy sees his marital infidelity as a major source of Biff's if not his own failure. This moment in the play has led Christopher Bigsby to point out that "Willy is not…a pure victim" (xvii). As we will discuss in the next chapter, a similar issue arises in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*; in early drafts of the novella, Bellow considered depicting instances of Tommy's unfaithfulness to his wife, but finally decided to leave those scenes out of the final version. While important in the context of Bellow's work, this detail does not alter in any significant way our reading of Willy's responsibility, since it merely reinforces his tendency to construe past actions as the cause of current problems. No matter how much his infidelity incriminates Willy in a moral-ethical sense, it must not be confused as the source of either his or his son's economic failures. Yet because this personal failure of Willy's is so inextricably

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[24] See discussion of McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps* in Chapter One of this dissertation.

intertwined with Biff's failure in the play, Miller seems to have shared some of his protagonist's self-oriented views on responsibility.

Of course, the reason Willy's infidelity concerns Biff at all is because the latter learns of his father's infidelity at an exceptionally inopportune moment. Wanting to surprise his father by visiting him on the road, Biff inadvertently stumbles upon Willy with his mistress. Biff's dismay at his father's betrayal is seen as the cause of his disenchantment with his father's ideals of success; it directly informs his decision not to enter into college. As Willy discovers in his discussion with a grown Bernard at the end of the play, Biff returned from the trip to Boston where he discovered his father's infidelity and, according to Bernard, gave "up his life" (72). Willy reacts to Bernard's question, "what happened in Boston, Willy?" in his usual way—i.e., he denies responsibility—but the incident has by now become so incontrovertibly associated in both Willy's unconsciousness and the viewer's mind with Biff's (once again, *willful*) failure that it is difficult not to view it as virtually the sole source of Biff's failure.

The lengths to which Willy goes to link his moral transgressions with both his own and Biff's economic failure must be read in the context of the dispersal of responsibility. It is Willy's utter confusion in almost all matters that leads him, for a lack of another option, to conclude that his own actions are the cause of current strife. Furthermore, the fact that Willy, Miller's most famous character, fails to live up to his creator's own criterion—that a moment must come when the "character realizes what has happened to him"—raises the question as to whether Miller shared some of Willy's illusions. One might readily imagine that had Willy committed such moral transgressions and then failed in life, he would have blamed his failure on past wrongdoing, but why does Biff have to find out about his father's unfaithfulness? Why not Linda? Only if Biff learns of Willy's betrayal can the latter cast himself as responsible for his

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Biff's failure. This detail also provides possible clues as to why Saul Bellow deleted scenes of

Tommy Wilhelm's marital infidelities from the final version of his novel. As we will discuss in

more depth in the final chapter, Bellow deleted these scenes in order to avoid giving a clear

referent for Tommy's guilt and to undermine his character's attempts to pin his guilt on the

reformist, New Deal past. In this regard, one discerns in Bellow's work a distinct shift in the

direction of more explicit discontent with antistatist policies of the postwar period. Whereas

these discontents are expressed implicitly in the inadequacy of present modes of help in *Death of

a Salesman*, they appear much more forcefully in *Seize the Day*.

Chapter 5

Not Free but Responsible: Guilt, White-Collar Ontology, and Sympathy in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*

"You can spend the entire second half of your life recovering from the mistakes of the first half" (88), explains Tommy Wilhelm, the guilt-ridden protagonist of Saul Bellow's 1956 novel *Seize the Day*. Overburdened with obligations to his ex-wife and two sons, which he is wont to meet out of a sense of paternal duty and forced to meet by the insistence of the manipulative mother of his children, Tommy struggles to make ends meet after recently losing his job as a salesman. To make matters worse, he consummates an ill-advised partnership with a questionable Dr. Tamkin speculating on lard futures, in which he stands to lose his last seven hundred dollars, despite reservations about the trustworthiness of his new business partner. The events of the story take place over the course of just one morning and afternoon in the mid-1950s—what Tommy calls his "day of reckoning" (92)—but this troubled character's frequent reminiscences on the first half of his life in the 1930s give us a good idea of how he arrived at the current impasse.

So what were the "mistakes" that he made in the first half of his life? As Dr. Tamkin, the self-proclaimed psychologist-business guru, correctly points out, Tommy has "lots of guilt" (69) in him, but on what grounds does Tommy assume in the passage cited above that the referent of his guilt lies in the 1930s? In addition to the parallels that Michael Clark has noted between Bellow's *Seize the Day* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, I wish to add one more on account of the

texts' depiction of history.[25] In Sophocles' tragedy, Oedipus' discovery of the truth about his parents and therefore about the source of his guilt (namely, his having unwittingly slain his father and wed his mother) is initiated by the plague that besets his city Thebes. Although Clark and others have taken the prophecy in *Oedipus Rex* at its word that the plague was caused by Oedipus's past wrongdoing, I am less inclined to do so. Rather, we might interpret this unfortunate king's downfall as follows: if not for the plague, something actually unrelated to his wrongdoing but only assumed related in the prophecy, then Oedipus never would have tried to find its cause, in which case he never would have searched for the mystery of his predecessor's death and discovered his guilt therein. This reading suggests that Oedipus's tale is meant to remind us of how our knowledge of the past is contingent on the present.

The same can be said about *Seize the Day*. After all, Tommy's emotional crisis never would have arisen if not for the dire financial straits he faces as a result of being recently unemployed. That is, he would not feel guilty for the mistakes of the first half of his life—certainly not to the extent that he does. For Tommy and Oedipus alike, actions from the first half of their lives acquire their regrettable character only in the context of recent hardship. Yet because Tommy dwells a great deal on the guilt that he feels for his alleged mistakes, even going so far as to cast them as the cause of current ailments, it is easy to assume along with most readers of the novel that those mistakes adequately account for present misgivings. This is a dubious assumption: just as Tommy reminds his father that if he had money then they "would be

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[25] See Michael Clark's "Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* and *Oedipus Rex*."

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a fine father and son" (51), we can say that if he had money, Tommy would have a "fine" life. Still, more than money is at stake here.

This chapter proposes that revealing the shorthand involved in Tommy's efforts to make the cause of his guilt appear to lie in the first half of his life constitutes one of the most pressing exegetical tasks for understanding the broad implications of the text. To do so is to unearth the way in which the novel traces contours of recent American history and rectifies misperceptions of that history prevalent among Bellow's contemporaries. I would like to begin then by pointing out the likelihood that Tommy's assumptions about his guilt have much to do with Bellow's own political commitments. Like so many intellectuals of his generation, Bellow was sympathetic to the left during the 1930s and then became disillusioned, long before writing *Seize the Day*. In his first work, *Dangling Man* (1944), he invokes themes that later became associated with what Sidney Hook has called "the literature of political disillusionment" (208): the novella consists of journal entries by an ex-Communist named Joseph, who struggles to reconcile his radical past with his current "dangling," a state characterized as being especially attuned to one's "inward transactions" (7).

Both *Seize the Day* and *Dangling Man* display a tendency commonly found in writings of ex-radicals not merely to emphasize and even embellish past wrongdoings but to assume more generally that the thirties was a time, in Daniel Bell's representative phrase, of a "loss of innocence" (303): that is, a time of guilt. In *Dangling Man*, there is an episode where Joseph purports to cite evidence of the wickedness of his former Communist friends, but then proceeds to tell of an innocuous enough scene in which a jealous lover gets revenge on his beloved by hypnotizing her (35-39). Hardly the image of wickedness Joseph no doubt intended to evoke, this moment depends on the reader's shared assumption that the radical past was an

unambiguously guilty one and thus bespeaks the omnipresence of this view in popular works of

the time by Daniel Bell, Leslie Fiedler, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and others. Even though *Seize the*

Day does not directly concern ex-radicals, resonances of the discourse of political

disillusionment are palpable in Tommy's feelings of guilt and in his hasty conclusion that actions

from the thirties stand behind present troubles.

At the same time, *Seize the Day* marks a notable departure from a pronounced strain of

ex-radicalism in that it expresses interest in preserving some things from the reformist agenda of

the 1930s. Tommy's tireless mining of the past serves both to call dominant views of recent

history into question and to erode the distance perceived between the past and the present. The

latter is especially important because it runs counter to salient impulses of the time. After World

War Two, Americans were understandably fearful of returning to Depression-era levels of

unemployment; this, combined with the "trauma" (Hook 262) often associated with remembering

one's radical past, made it customary for many commentators either to pretend the thirties never

happened or to portray them as remote from the fifties. Ultimately, this rhetoric helped solidify

the conservative view that that time of radicalism was unlikely to repeat itself and that it held

little relevance for present generations—aside from the ample lessons it assumedly provided in

the dangers of political callowness. Again, Bell: "little of [the politics of the thirties] has

meaning today" (14). In this way, thinkers of the so-called "consensus" period were quick to

fashion America as having successfully molted all remnants of radicalism, which frequently

included New Deal reformism as well as Communism, and found comforting evidence of the

new generation's increased "wisdom" (Bell 300) in its having transcended ideology, a thesis put

forth by Bell in *The End of Ideology* (1960) and by Daniel Boorstin in *The Genius of American*

Politics (1953). Whereas much contemporary historiography thus emphasizes the rift between

the thirties and the fifties, Tommy's scavenging the history of the previous two decades as it relates to his own experience serves to revive and revitalize this past; to prop it up as a valid, not incommensurable, counterpoint to the fifties; and, most importantly, to call attention to ontological adjustments Americans were forced to make as a result of political and economic developments. Rejecting dominant historiographical paradigms, Bellow draws attention to the phenomenological side of the experience of the Depression, the New Deal, and finally postwar affluence. However dramatic these historical and political developments may have finally been, *Seize the Day* suggests that by considering them in terms of the ontological adaptations they engendered in Americans, these developments lend themselves more readily to linear accounts of history.

Of course, Bellow was not completely without models on which to draw in his depiction of history. Alongside accounts like Bell's, which emphasized the ruptures or fissures in recent intellectual thought, there were notable attempts to understand history in more linear terms, as C. Wright Mills does in his influential *White Collar* (1951). In fact, Mills's study and Bellow's novel share remarkably similar epistemological underpinnings. Mills famously traces the evolution of the American workforce from aspiring small-business owners and entrepreneurs to white-collar workers, highlighting the "psychological terms" of these economic and historical developments. "It is one great task of social studies today," Mills writes, "to describe the larger economic and political situation in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of the individual" (xx). One would be hard-pressed to come up with a better description of the task Bellow implicitly sets for himself in *Seize the Day*. Moreover, the novel calls to mind what Mills identified as a "literature of resignation," since Tommy so emphatically accepts responsibility for his present failings and thereby upholds the ideological imperative to provide

what Mills calls "an apology for the system" (263). As Mills explains, "failure in the literature

of success [a.k.a. literature of resignation] is seen as willful, is imputed to the individual, and is

often internalized by him as guilt, as a competitive dissatisfaction" (283). That Tommy accepts

responsibility by blaming his failure on mistakes from the first half of his life only augments the

force of his apology for the economic system of the 1950s.

Unlike Mills, however, Bellow imagines white-collar ontology to emerge from a tradition

of federal aid or relief—not from a tradition of entrepreneurship. Just as Bellow himself had

done, Tommy tapped the services of the WPA (Works Progress Administration) sometime

before its liquidation in 1943. But now, in the absence of the safety net provided earlier by New

Deal agencies like the WPA, most of which (including CCC, CWA, FERA, and WPA) had been

disbanded as part of a concerted attack by conservatives in the early 1940s, Tommy is forced to

make requests for sympathy from his father and Dr. Tamkin, in what I suggest is a purely

compensatory act. While it may be tempting to read, as Abigail Cheever does, these requests for

sympathy as signs of what David Riesman once termed "other-directed" personality, this chapter

insists that sympathy must be seen as descending directly from the history of New Deal relief, as

Tommy's recollections of events from the 1930s make plain. Turning to his father and Dr.

Tamkin for sympathy, Tommy tries to compensate for the disappearance of New Deal relief

programs. The rise of postwar antistatism that the novel hereby evokes can thus be read as the

driving force behind changes in his selfhood. Only by calling attention to this neglected

dimension of the novel can we appreciate the way *Seize the Day* resurrects the legacy of New

Deal statism and anticipates future efforts at rehabilitating the state as a site for political

resistance in the work of Chester Himes and other civil rights era authors.[26]

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[26] For more on this, see Margaret Hunt Gram's "Chester Himes and the Capacities of State."

"On the Pitfalls of Guilty Meditations"

The proliferation of ex-radical confessions, the increasing popularity of existentialist thought, and the introduction of Freud to broad American audiences, all of which occurred in the 1940s, make it easy to detect a thread of guilty musings in midcentury American literature. By the 1950s, it had become clear to some that these musings were fraught with various difficulties, and that the main issue had to do with the intense compulsion one experiences to narrate feelings of guilt—as seen time and again in the confessional genre, from Augustine to Rousseau and Dostoevsky to twentieth-century political apostates like Whittaker Chambers. In his reading of the ribbon scene from Rousseau's *Confessions* (heavily influenced as the reading is by Paul de Man's in *Allegories of Reading* [1979]), Peter Brooks concludes that there is always the real potential that "the performative aspect [i.e., the act of confessing itself] will produce the constative, create the sin or guilt that the act of confessing requires" (21). Perhaps the ubiquity of guilty meditations during this time explains why some authors were able to anticipate later warnings, like Brooks's, about challenges germane to narrating guilt.

Herein lies the importance of Humbert's insistence, in Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 *Lolita*, that he privilege the "artist" in himself over the "gentleman," in what constitutes a formal technique that he terms "retrospective verisimilitude" (71). For Humbert, the successful implementation of this narrative device will help him resist the urge to inscribe present emotions (especially guilt) on his former self retroactively, something that would take away from the verisimilitude of the account since that self was devoid of those emotions. By bowdlerizing his story this way, Humbert preserves the integrity of the narrative and simultaneously demonstrates his familiarity with the intricacies of the confessional genre to which the novel so clearly belongs.

But the lesser-known narrator of E. L. Doctorow's first novel, *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960),

best articulates Humbert's and others' anxiety about narrating guilt when he says, "I'm trying to

put down what happened but the closer I've come in time [to his present feelings of guilt] the

less clear I am in my mind…I have the cold feeling everything I've written doesn't tell how it

was, no matter how careful I've been to get it all down it still escapes me" (199).

It should come as no surprise that *Seize the Day* displays a concern for many of these

issues. As we have seen, Tommy produces his guilt retroactively when he singles out the

"Hollywood mistake" (21) as the cause of his current problems, even though the real causes are

much more recent (and perhaps not in him at all). In exhibiting his errors, the novel profiles

dynamics found in guilty meditations so as to underscore how Tommy, and white-collar workers

like him, bears responsibility for failure in a way he never did before—even when he made the

Hollywood mistake. To see how Bellow subtly undermines his character's assumptions about

past mistakes, one must carefully examine clues in Tommy's recollections of those events.

Tommy is bothered most of all by his decision to ignore his parents' urgings, drop out of college,

and move to Hollywood to become an actor. Of the other "ten such decisions [that] made up the

history of his life" (19), Tommy otherwise mentions only his marriage, and it receives far less

attention. He claims that he does not have the "brains" (13) to enter the medical profession like

his father, and instead places his hopes on his good looks and charm; indeed even his father, now

his greatest critic, used to say that Tommy "could charm a bird out of a tree" (3). Thus Tommy

is easily intrigued by a talent scout, Maurice Venice, who expresses interest in him as a potential

actor after seeing his picture in a college paper. After moving and changing his name from

Wilhelm to Tommy Wilhelm, he discovers he does not have what it takes to be a successful actor.

"There for seven years, stubbornly, he had tried to become a screen artist," the narrator explains.

"Long before that time his ambition or delusion had ended, but through pride and perhaps also through laziness he had remained in California" (4).

Tommy's "delusion" should have ended much earlier. First, despite his initial interest in Tommy, Venice displays signs of being a disreputable character who compensates for his ineptness by exaggerating his scouting acumen and meager accomplishments. Second, he pulls a "quick about-face" (19) after seeing the results of a preliminary screen test. Bellow writes, "In those days Wilhelm had had a speech difficulty. It was not a true stammer, it was a thickness of speech which the sound track exaggerated. The film showed that he had many peculiarities, otherwise unnoticeable" (19-20). Nevertheless, one wonders why this impulsive Hollywood decision begets such profound remorse almost twenty years later.[27] While at first Tommy invented "several versions" of this time in his life out of a sense of "charity to himself" (12), the spirit that inspired this previous "charity" has clearly dissipated: now he skewers himself time and again for this episode, calling it his "first great mistake" (14). Emphasizing the severity of the Hollywood "mistake," Tommy compares it to "pick[ing] up a weapon and strik[ing] myself a blow with it" (14). As Allan Chavkin has shown in his examination of the first draft of *Seize the Day*, originally entitled "One of Those Days," Bellow's note to himself on the back of one of his handwritten pages—"Hollywood thread throughout" (84)—highlights the importance he placed on this episode from the earliest stages of the work's conception.

The apparent incommensurability of the regret that Tommy feels over his Hollywood blunder with the actual severity of the offense raises vital questions as to the true source of his

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[27] As Tommy himself notes of this mistake: "I didn't seem even to realize that there was a depression. How could I have been such a jerk as not to prepare for anything and just go on luck and inspiration?" (12).

guilt. Chavkin notes that the story was originally to include an episode on Tommy's marital infidelities (92). To have left this episode in the final version of the novel would have meant casting Tommy even more in the mold of Willy Loman from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), a text to which Bellow was clearly indebted; Bellow's decision to remove this incriminating episode suggests that he did not want to provide such an unambiguous source for Tommy's guilt. The gamut of views about guilt that have been espoused in critical assessments of the novel confirms that he was largely successful on this account: readers have done everything from ignoring altogether Tommy's attempts to pin his guilt on the distant past to accepting the Hollywood mistake as an unproblematic and proportionate source of guilt to collapsing his guilt into the rather nebulous Bellovian leitmotif of the virtue of suffering as germane to the "human condition."[28]

Tommy's profound sense of responsibility makes him a close kin of other responsible characters in midcentury American literature, from Richard Wright's Fred Daniels in "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1944) to Arthur Miller's Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) to J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). As I would argue is true in these texts as well, Tommy's guilt is less a symbol of some aspect of the human condition than a particular reaction to the diminished role of the state. To put his guilt in this context, one

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[28] For the most thorough analysis of suffering in *Seize the Day*, see Janis Stout's "Suffering as Meaning in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*." On the subject of suffering as a leitmotif for Tommy's "humanity" or "authenticity," she largely recapitulates earlier accounts by scholars like Sarah Cohen in *Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter*, Gordon Bordewyk in "Saul Bellow's Death of a Salesman," and Allan Chavkin in "'The Hollywood Thread' and the First Draft of *Seize the Day*." Ultimately, this reading can be traced to Leslie Fiedler's much earlier assessment, where he claims that Tommy represents "essential man." See his "Saul Bellow" in *A New Fiedler Reader*.

might note that Tommy has not always been so hard on himself, as his admission that he invented "versions" of the Hollywood episode suggests. As he recounts the "true events" (12) of this time in his life, he inadvertently reveals clues as to what served for him in the past—namely, when he found it appropriate to extend himself "charity"—as factors assuaging his guilt. For example, there is a revealing exchange between Venice and Tommy that takes place while the former is still trying to convince the latter that this is his "chance" to become famous "in one jump" and to escape the daily grind of most during the Depression. Venice succinctly captures the mood of the time when he explains: "Listen, everywhere there are people trying hard, miserable, in trouble, downcast, tired, trying and trying. They need a break, right? A break-through, a help, luck, or sympathy" (18). Of course, Venice's aim is to convince Tommy that he should not pass up this opportunity to avoid some of the volatilities of human existence without guarantees of "get[ting] anywheres" (18), even with the talent he still believes Tommy has. Tommy agrees with Venice and wishes to hear more on the subject, but as it turns out Venice "had no more to say; he had concluded" (19).

But Venice need not say more: as it is, his words aptly highlight the truism that one could not rely on virtue, effort, or talent alone in the 1930s. In comments elsewhere to Tommy, Venice says that, "when you start to act you're no more an ordinary person" (19); for Venice, an actor does not fit into the category of the "average" (19). These comments have led Julia Eichelberger to read Venice as a proponent of the ideal of the self-made man (69), but this reading is decidedly problematic in light of the previously cited passage on the need for a "break." Yes, for Venice, acting can provide a quick path to success, a way to circumvent the daily toil of the "average," and he no doubt finds this sales pitch expedient in recruiting young talent. But the point is that gaining access to such a quick path does not depend on self-making. On the

contrary, Venice's accent on the need for a "break" or a "break-through"—in short, "help"—suggests that, at least during the 1930s, one relied on external sources of help (a point I shall return to below). As Venice's words make plain, everyone struggles to make it by, including many who possess talent and virtue, but this alone was not enough to guarantee success in the 1930s.

Venice's words cut to the very heart of changes in selfhood that had occurred since the beginning of the Depression. As Alfred Kazin's remarks illustrate, the Depression ushered in radical transformations in American life, amounting to no less than "a new conception of reality" (363). "Life seemed at once so different in tone," Kazin explains, "in the very consciousness that sustained it, that all conventional values were suddenly uprooted and many of them seemed cheap" (363). Among the values so abruptly "uprooted" were many assumptions attendant on the ideal of the self-made man, as the economic crisis "deprived men of their security and left them impotent in the face of disaster" (364). In an obvious allusion to the long-standing tradition of self-making, Kazin writes, "Where the American had once needed only to adapt his life to the external environment of society, he was now directly menaced by society and physically victimized by it" (365). With emphasis on the ways people were "victimized" by society, "the very conception of responsibility seemed unique" (363), Kazin writes.

Bellow goes to great lengths to distinguish the ethos of the 1930s, as exemplified by Venice's comments above, from the markedly different climate of the 1950s. If personal virtue was not enough to ensure success during the Depression, we see that it continues to carry little weight in the prosperous postwar years, only now this is true not because one relies on external sources of "help" but because success is supposedly so easy to come by. As Tommy says to Tamkin in an attempt to demonstrate his knowledge of the 1950s speculating scene, "there's

money everywhere. Everyone is shoveling it in" (6). Tamkin's response is even more revealing: "I think about people, just because they have a few bucks to invest, making fortunes. They have no sense, they have no talent, they just have the extra dough and it makes them more dough[…]With all this money around you don't want to be a fool while everyone else is making. I know guys who make five, ten thousand a week just by fooling around" (6-7). In stark contrast to Venice, Tamkin suggests that because economic success in the mid-1950s has become a reality for so many Americans riding the tide of postwar affluence, "talent" is not required to achieve it. Indeed, the process of making money (work) has come to resemble the process of enjoying leisure ("fooling around") and requires little of the effort that it did in the past—by contrast, Dr. Adler accounts for his success with "hard work" (47). And this, of course, is not to be confused with actually being, in Tamkin's words, a "fool" for not making money, since the latter formulation connotes the responsibility one now wields for failure.

If Tommy was not responsible for failure in the 1930s, his guilt points not to the first half of his life but to his most recent failures; responsibility and guilt are coextensive with his entrance into the white-collar workforce. Not surprisingly, Mills identifies responsibility and guilt as constitutive elements of the message implicit in the "literature of resignation," which "strives to control goals and ways of life by lowering the level of ambition, and by replacing the older goals with more satisfying internal goals." The "older goals" and, more specifically, their figures of success are then "tarnish[ed]" by portraying those figures as "guilt-ridden, ulcerated people of uneasy conscience" (282). Mills continues: "If men are responsible for their success, they are also responsible for their failure…Failure in the literature of success is seen as willfull, is imputed to the individual, and is often internalized by him as guilt, as a competitive dissatisfaction" (283). Tommy's experience as a white-collar salesman corroborates Mills's

account. While the "charity" he previously extended himself bespeaks the way he did *not* bear

responsibility for failure, for reasons I will clarify in a moment, his entrance into the white-collar

workforce has meant that his aspirations have been circumscribed and that responsibility for

failure has been securely localized in his sense of self.[29]

"White-Collar Responsibility and its Discontents"

For all the similarities between Tommy and the prototypical white-collar worker, Bellow offers

at least one noteworthy twist on Mills's model. In the transition Mills describes from a largely

entrepreneurial society to one in which white-collar work encompasses the far greater sector of

the workforce, workers suffer a loss of autonomy as they are reduced to all-too-often menial jobs.

Whereas the lost past of white-collar work is a tradition of self-making and entrepreneurship,

Tommy's is one of New Deal statism. Seen from this vantage point, his guilt for actions

committed in the thirties coalesces with a sort of nostalgia for a time not when he might have

become an entrepreneur, but when he might have turned—and when he did turn—to the state for

relief in a moment of hardship like the one he experiences now. This important revision of

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[29] This is the significance of Tamkin's much-discussed philosophy of the two souls. He explains: "The

true soul is the one that pays the price. It suffers and gets sick, and it realizes that the pretender can't be

loved. Because the pretender is a lie. The true soul loves the truth. And when the true soul feels like this,

it wants to kill the pretender. The love has turned into hate. Then you become dangerous. A killer. You

have to kill the deceiver…Whenever the slayer slays, he wants to slay the soul in him which has gypped

and deceived him. Who is the enemy? Him. And his love? Also. Therefore, all suicide is murder, and

all murder is suicide" (67). Locating the enemy literally inside each subject, one has, according to

Tamkin's doctrine and Tommy's present worldview, no one to blame but oneself.

Mills's model, and the history of the decline of New Deal relief that it evokes, underwrites Tommy's transformation into a responsible subject.

As a result of the economic upsurge brought about by America's mobilization for World War Two, there seemed little need for relief agencies such as WPA, CCC, FERA, or CWA, all of which were liquidated by the early 1940s as part of what historian William Chafe has called "a systematic assault against New Deal programs" (26). The experience of fighting authoritarian regimes added more fuel to the flames: as Brinkley tells us, the war experience both "discouraged American liberals" and "forced them to reassess their positions" (154) in favor of markedly more antistatist policies. "Perhaps inevitably," Brinkley writes, "[the war] prompted some liberals to reconsider their own commitment to an activist managerial state. Statism, they began to believe, could produce tyranny and oppression. However serious the structural problems of the capitalist economy, a statist cure might be worse than the disease" (154). Of course, the onset of the Cold War signaled yet another stage in this trend, characterized by a further ratcheting up of antistatist rhetoric, with some going so far as to paint America's reformist past, including Roosevelt himself, as sharing much in common with the trademarks of Totalitarianism regimes.[30]

Seize the Day can be read as an early attempt to resurrect the legacy of New Deal statism in order to critique aspects of postwar antistatism. To insist that Tommy's guilt be seen as derivative of recent political and economic developments rather than of the radical past is not to diminish the significance of the past but, instead, merely to challenge the assumption, made most often by ex-radicals, that the referent of the "twice-born" generation's guilt lay in the thirties. In his depiction of Tommy's emergence as a responsible subject and of the pernicious effects this

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[30] See, for example, Dwight MacDonald's "Responsibility of Peoples" in *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*.

has on his overall mental and psychological well being, Bellow's story suggests that the reformist agenda of the thirties does not deserve the offhanded dismissal it frequently received in the verifiably more antistatist climate of the postwar period. This point is particularly relevant in the case of white-collar professionals, who had supported Roosevelt during the thirties and then, in the moderate climate of the fifties, moved to the center.[31] In this sense, the past is crucial in the novel not so much for what it is perceived to have been as for what its resurfacing in the present reveals about changes in selfhood. For Tommy, this means that he no longer hopes for a "break…a break-through, a help, luck, or sympathy" of the kind Venice had in mind during the 1930s, where Venice's words must be understood in the context of New Deal relief. Now that relief initiatives have disappeared, Tommy has little place to turn for "help" or "sympathy."

This painful reality strikes home for Tommy in a conversation where Dr. Adler tries to impress his friend, Mr. Perls, with stories of his son's earlier success selling children's furniture in the Rojax Corporation. As Dr. Adler boasts that his son's salary "was up in the five figures," Tommy realizes that implicit in his father's ostentatious pride is an intended reminder of his current failure, for which Dr. Adler—a proud, self-made man—holds him responsible. "They adore money!" Tommy thinks to himself about his father and Mr. Perls, "Holy money! Beautiful money! It was getting so that people were feeble-minded about everything except money. While if you didn't have it you were a dummy, a dummy! You had to excuse yourself from the face of the earth" (32). Attesting once again to the responsibility one bears for failure in the fifties, these comments acquire added significance when considered in the context of the turn that the conversation takes next. Dr. Adler, assuming a somewhat condescending tone, remarks that Tommy must "think about making a living and meeting [his] obligations" instead of

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[31] See Szalay's *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* 179.

worrying about a "silly feud" with his former employers, who derailed his chances of receiving the position of "vice presidency" by hiring a son-in-law in an act of nepotism. Though obviously perturbed, Tommy responds to his father's remarks with a sense of "pride" (34): "I don't have to be told about my obligations. I've been meeting them for years. In more than twenty years I've never had a penny of help from anybody. I preferred to dig a ditch on the WPA but never asked anyone to meet my obligations for me" (34).

In this revealing moment, Bellow casts his character's white-collar ontology as emerging not from a tradition of small-business ownership or self-making but from a brief, though important, time spent receiving governmental relief. All the more meaningful because it appears in the chapter immediately following the one where Tommy remembers his Hollywood blunder, this passage invokes the history of New Deal relief programs and, more importantly, their subsequent demise; in doing so, it supplies a framework for understanding the rise of responsible selfhood. During its tenure from 1935 to 1943, the Works Project Administration provided almost eight million jobs as part of a nationwide governmental relief effort. The most ambitious relief agency, its goal was to provide one paid job for families where the breadwinner had suffered long-term unemployment. As Nick Taylor points out in his recent history, *American-Made: The Enduring Legacy of the WPA: When FDR put the Nation to Work* (2008), the WPA's "accomplishments were enormous, yet during its lifetime it was the most excoriated program of the entire New Deal" (2)—a point which can be discerned in Tommy's admission that working for the WPA "brought the family into contempt" (35). Yet Bellow's mention of the WPA is certainly important, not least of all because, as Taylor and others have noted, Americans were reluctant in the fifties to consider the impact this agency had at a time when the nation desperately needed the relief it provided.

Bellow knew a good deal about this himself. As a recent biographer, James Atlas, has

explained, Bellow struggled to make ends meet for quite some time before publishing *Dangling*

Man. During that period he, like Tommy, became a beneficiary of state largesse: as Atlas reports,

Bellow, under the prodding of his wife, "went down to the WPA office and got himself certified

for relief, a routine matter" (63). Assigned to the Federal Writers' Project, Bellow joined the

ranks of Chicago writers Nelson Algren, Frank Yerby, and Richard Wright, who also collected a

wage from the federal government. Bellow "always spoke warmly of the project and its

generous benefactors" (64), writes Atlas; far from feeling shame for having resorted to

government relief, as Tommy's family does in *Seize the Day*, Bellow "was comfortable with—

even comforted by—Roosevelt's benign paternalism" (66). In his portrayal of how the WPA

allows Tommy to preserve a sense of dignity in challenging times, Bellow calls attention to

positive aspects of statism and thus echoes sentiments expressed by the likes of Richard Wright

and Chester Himes.[32]

Insofar as the WPA and New Deal relief more generally stand as a counterpoint to the

relief or help that Tommy desires in the 1950s but cannot secure, even from his own father, the

history of the evolving idea of the state less as a vehicle for public relief and ever more as a

safeguard of consumerism subtends changes in selfhood that the novel portrays. Even as the

WPA episode brings shame on Tommy's family, it also enables his "pride" in this scene, as well

as his ability to claim, also with pride, that he has been meeting his obligations without "help

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[32] Though both Richard Wright and Chester Himes had ambivalent views on the New Deal itself, they

expressed gratitude to the WPA for its support. For the most thorough account of Wright's relationship to

the New Deal, see Szalay's *New Deal Modernism* 201-227. For a recent account of Himes and the New

Deal, see Margaret Hunt Gram's "Chester Himes and the Capacities of State."

from anybody" for more than twenty years. Perhaps it is worth adding a corrective to Tommy's

remarks: he may have met his obligations without help from *anybody*, but not without help. His

family's shame notwithstanding, accepting relief from the state allowed Tommy to meet his

"obligations" in an upstanding manner. The reason why his current situation appears so bleak is

because this former source of help is no longer available. Thus, right after his reference to the

WPA, he is suddenly overcome with "the peculiar burden of his existence" (35). What's more,

descriptions of "particulars of physiognomy" (xvii), to borrow Cynthia Ozick's terms from an

introduction to the novella, pervade the whole text, and they almost always underscore the

physical consequences of Tommy's having become responsible for the "burden of his existence":

Bellow repeatedly describes him as lethargic, slouched, and slovenly ("he looked like a

hippopotamus" [26]). It seems unlikely that his current hardship differs significantly from

hardships experienced in the past (when, for example, he received help from the WPA); the

difference rather lies in the relative paucity of state relief in postwar America. Hence Tommy's

spiritual and psychological torment, to which the physical signs of his decaying body attest, is a

direct result of the state's disavowal of responsibilities for public welfare borne in the past.

Since he no longer sees the state as having a stake in his condition—which is to say: since the

state no longer sees itself as having a stake in his condition—Tommy is left with little option but

to absorb responsibility for what had been state burdens. And this is, of course, exactly what he

does: with the weight of burdens mounting unbearably on his shoulders as the story progresses,

Tommy suitably concludes that "carry[ing] about" this "collection of nameless things" comprises

"the business of his life" (35). "That must be what man was for" (35), Tommy surmises; and

then, as if to elicit the painfully-felt absence of the WPA, he thinks to himself: "But now it's

almost gone [his money], and where am I supposed to turn for more?" (36) In this moment,

Tommy bears a resemblance to Willy Loman "calling into a void for help that will never come."

It is striking how many readers have overlooked the pivotal role that government relief

plays in the novel. Generational conflicts and their implications in terms of Jewish identity have

garnered far more critical attention. While these questions are surely important, they are

emphasized to the neglect of New Deal relief as a driving force of the novel's narrative structure

and the evolution of subjectivity implicit therein. For example, in a recent reading of *Seize the*

Day, Abigail Cheever ignores the history of state relief and therefore interprets the theme of

"failure" as merely the "backdrop against which the generational conflicts of the novel play out"

(169). Invoking David Riesman's famous distinction in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) between

"inner-" and "other-directed" behavior patterns, Cheever quite expectedly reads Dr. Adler and

Tommy as representatives of inner- and other-directed characters, respectively. In so doing,

however, she not only downplays the significance of Tommy's own transition from inner- to

other-directed behavior (we must keep in mind that the Hollywood mistake was his "bid for

liberty" [21], a venture he undertook in spite of his parents' pleas, and for this reason indicative

of inner-directed personality) but also fails to notice how this transition coincides with the state's

withdrawal of public relief.[33]   Tommy's ruminations on his various "souls" should not be read

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[33] Bellow provides a history of Tommy's evolving selfhood with references to his decision to volunteer

for fighting in WWII—out of a feeling of responsibility for others—when he could have taken an

exemption (51). By contrast, Dr. Adler, a proud, self-made man, chastises Tommy for this, admonishing

him instead to "carry nobody on [his] back" (51). Given that Alan Brinkley identifies the war experience

as a pivotal moment in the rise of postwar antistatism, it seems significant that Bellow dates Tommy's

own transformation to precisely that period.

just as a sort of existential search for an "authentic self" (Cheever 173), but also as an attempt to

make sense of changes in self-perception necessitated by developments in the political arena.

More importantly, Cheever conflates Tommy's appeals for sympathy with the other-

directed need for "acceptance" or, in Riesman's terms, "approval" (Cheever 71), when in fact his

pleas for sympathy are animated by the eminently pragmatic consideration mentioned above,

which is where he will find money, help, and sympathy now that governmental relief is no longer

available. The first place Tommy turns is naturally to his father, and then, when he realizes

sympathy will not be forthcoming from him, to Tamkin. Far from being a sign of other-directed

character, his requests for sympathy take on new meaning when read in the context of New Deal

relief. Given that sympathy constitutes the sole means by which he hopes to ameliorate present

hardship, we might say that it represents a *compensatory* form of relief. Here it is worth

recalling the aforementioned juxtaposition between Venice's notion of sympathy (from the

1930s) and the kind of sympathy that Tommy wishes to secure from his father and Tamkin (in

the 1950s). Whereas the former is far more fundamental and all-encompassing in terms of its

potential to help, to render aid or relief ("a break, a break-through"), the latter aims only at

mitigating somewhat the symptoms of suffering, like the pills Tommy takes. In short, the latter

compensates for the lack of the former.

No detail in the book speaks more pointedly to the purely compensatory nature of

sympathy than Tommy's feelings of powerlessness. Although he casts his former belief in

freedom as a sanguine period through which everyone passes on the road to maturity ("In middle

age you no longer thought such thoughts about free choice" [21]), it is no coincidence that that

period in his life ("when he's young and strong and impulsive and dissatisfied with the way

things are" and thus "wants to rearrange them to assert his freedom" [21]) corresponded with the

time when the state provided a safety net in the event of failure. Furthermore, it is questionable

whether his feelings of ineffectuality are a factor of "middle age" because they are by no means

unique to him: throughout the fifties, one discerns a veritable anxiety in social and intellectual

thought over likely losses of autonomy. From C. Wright Mills and David Riesman to William

Whyte, whose *The Organization Man* was published in the same year as Bellow's novel,

commentators were preoccupied with the idea that people were no longer as free as they had

been. Mills, for example, characterizes white-collar ontology in the following terms:

> In a world crowded with big ugly forces, the white-collar man is readily assumed
>
> to possess all the supposed virtues of the small creature. He may be at the bottom
>
> of the social world, but he is, at the same time, gratifyingly middle class. It is easy
>
> as well as safe to sympathize with his troubles; he can do little or nothing about
>
> them. (xii)

The impulse to sympathize with white collar workers emerges in connection with their

powerlessness.

For both Mills and Bellow, sympathy has taken on important new meanings in the 1950s.

On the one side, sympathy connotes the subject's feelings of powerlessness and the contradictory

proposition that he is nevertheless responsible for failure. On the other, it stands for the

diminished expectations Tommy and other white-collar workers harbor when it comes to

securing relief or help. Not unlike what Mills describes as management strategies for creating

good "morale" among "cheerful robots" (233) in an effort "to control goals and ways of life by

lowering the level of ambition, and by replacing the older goals with more satisfying internal

goals" (282), Tommy's ambitions have been noticeably curbed. On several occasions, he

explains that he does not "need much," only a "little steady income" (7) or, in the case of his

father, sympathy (and that, he says, "isn't all a question of money" [106]). Without the sort of help or sympathy that Venice had in mind in the 1930s, Tommy aspires to obtain an ersatz sympathy that falls far short of the relief he needs. An instructive model for the compensatory technologies Tommy employs can therefore be found in Friedrich Nietzsche's description of slave mentality in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887). As noted above, slaves, having been relegated to an inherently inferior position, stage a "revolt" in morality against the nobles by positing free will; even though they really have no choice but to submit to the abuse of their oppressors, slaves capture a small victory inasmuch as they take the abuse without reprisal and then claim themselves good for doing so. Nietzsche calls the technology with which slaves bring about this dubious revolt "ressentiment," a term that denotes the feelings of powerlessness intrinsic to slave morality. In their ressentiment, slaves are "denied the proper response of action," and so they "compensate for it only with imaginary revenge" (21). Like Mills's literature of resignation, "ressentiment" resigns slaves to an inferior position.

Though Tommy does not seek "revenge" of any kind, Nietzsche's remarks shed light on the compensatory mechanisms at work in the novel and allow us to better situate the politics of sympathy in the context of mid-twentieth-century American literature. In a reading of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Szalay argues that the novel exhibits a welfarist concern for imagining how individuals (especially women) can extend "sympathetic identifications beyond the family, beyond the citizen's immediate horizon of experience" (172). For Szalay, this extension of sympathetic relations operates on "impersonal terms" (180) that mirror the actuarial methods used by New Deal policy makers. Hence, Rose of Sharon's nursing the dying man in the final scene of Steinbeck's novel, a man who remains to her, Szalay

emphasizes, "unknown" (180), exemplifies the project at the heart of New Deal policy—that of "convinc[ing] Americans to care for families they would never know" (176).

Bellow's *Seize the Day* clearly signals a new stage in the evolving idea of the twentieth-century state. Sympathy no longer points as if of necessity to the act of sympathizing, as Szalay assumes, but rather to the markedly different project of gaining the sympathy of peers, friends, or family members. In his seminal study *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith describes sympathetic relations as a potentially two-sided endeavor: on the one side, there is the person who, in an act of "fellow-feeling," sympathizes with another. On the other side, there is the person who seeks to gain sympathy from others, even though this often requires that one "renew…grief" inasmuch as one is forced to "awaken in their memory the remembrance of those circumstances which occasioned their affliction" (8). In the main, literary criticism has focused on the former, and for this reason critics have read sympathy as exemplifying a welfarist sensibility aimed at preparing American citizens for statist intervention in the name of public relief. *Seize the Day* challenges this view by calling attention to the latter side of this endeavor. The novel asks, in other words, not how sympathy might be co-opted to buttress statist ambitions but how it can be used to compensate for antistatist ones.

Conclusion

Our discussion of Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* marks the conclusion of this dissertation. Since one of this study's main goals has been to instate a more historically rigorous understanding of the interrelationship between literature and politics in mid-twentieth-century America, Bellow's text is in many ways an appropriate place to finish. After all, the novel's main character, Tommy, serves as an illuminating nexus between several key points that this dissertation raises. When placed alongside forebears like Mary McCarthy's Pflaumen, Richard Wright's Fred Daniels, or Siegel and Shuster's Superman, Tommy reflects distinct changes in notions of self-making brought about by political developments of the previous two decades. He is, we might say, the culmination of these developments. Pflaumen, Daniels, and Superman all aim to provide for others something comparable to what Bellow's character calls *sympathy*, whereas Tommy seeks almost exclusively to gain sympathy for himself, and this task takes center stage in Bellow's novel. In the works out of which Pflaumen, Daniels, and Superman emerge, there are characters who seek to make themselves the object of another's charity (whom we can therefore liken to Tommy), but those figures—e.g., Margaret Sargent in *The Company She Keeps*—take a backseat in these earlier texts to the more important work done by statesmen: the Pflaumens, the Mans, and the Supermans.

This shift stands at the center of this project. It is first perceptible in Wright's fiction and autobiography from *Native Son* through *Savage Holiday*. While Wright goes to great lengths not to associate *Native Son*'s Bigger Thomas with feelings of guilt and responsibility, the author

displays a preoccupation with these same feelings in almost all of his protagonists after Bigger: most notably, Fred Daniels, himself in *Black Boy*, Cross Damon, and Erskine Fowler. Bigger Thomas's emphatic rejection of guilt and responsibility—as a product of environment—has rather obvious social and racial implications. As Wright famously noted about his *Uncle Tom's Children*, he was intent not to write another book which "even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about" (454), and *Native Son* emerged directly out of this impulse. However, the evolution of Wright's thinking on guilt and responsibility suggests that he adopted notably more mainstream views, as his post-Bigger Thomas characters almost always conform to a more or less Niebuhrian notion of man's unavoidable guilt.

    Seize the Day registers similarly epic shifts in American literary practice. Not only does the task of securing sympathy from others to a large extent displace the act of sympathizing, but even the modicum of sympathizing that does occur within the novel has taken on a whole new meaning. This can be seen in the final scene of the novel. Tommy stumbles upon the funeral of an unknown man and is suddenly overcome with intense feelings of sadness for this fellow "human creature" (113). On the face of it, this moment likens Tommy to Pflaumen, Fred Daniels, and Superman; Bellow's character shows himself capable of sympathizing with a man he has never met. However, this "consummation of [Tommy's] heart's ultimate need" (114) must be distinguished from the examples of "fellow-feeling" or "sympathizing" mentioned above, since it takes place only on account of the fact that Tommy, like Willy Loman, has finally realized the futility of securing relief for his own afflictions. The best he can do, Bellow implies, is to give sympathy to others. In this regard, sympathizing with others derives not from the broad impulse to provide relief to American citizens, as we saw in earlier works, but from Tommy's diminishing expectations of receiving help himself. Once a sign of statesmanship and

the imperative for state and community to render aid to the needy, the act of sympathizing with others has now been folded into compensatory mechanisms arising in the wake of the state's refusal to bear a significant share of the collective burden.

In conclusion, I wish to note that this study has been animated by a concern for what Edward Said, in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, characterized as the intellectual's proper concern: the life of the average citizen. By placing renewed emphasis on existential categories like guilt, freedom, and anxiety, we have tried not just to reinvigorate these somewhat outmoded terms but to demonstrate how, when combined with a historically-minded approach, they remain crucial for understanding the subtleties of midcentury American selfhood. Only this sort of approach is capable of undermining abiding antistatist biases from the Cold War, which have made literary criticism slow to pick up on negative aspects of the diminished role of government.

There is much important work that remains to be done in excavating other effects of the evolving "idea of the state." The most important of these tasks involves examining how these dynamics have played themselves out in recent years. As mentioned in the previous chapter, fine work is currently underway on the partial revival of statism in the name of civil rights and the new relationships between state and individuals that this introduced. Additional work must also be done on recent abjurations of welfare and social responsibility. As historian Jefferson Cowie explains in *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (2012), the seventies witnessed the most significant attack in recent years on remaining New Deal relief programs. How these attacks inflected literature of the seventies remains an understudied topic. The Clinton administration's attempt to reshape the face of American welfare, in what was revealingly called the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act" of 1996, took many of these matters to a head. Most recently, there have been talks of cutting

unemployment benefits and food stamps for the poor in the midst of "government shutdowns" and ongoing economic crises. This study hopes that it will inspire reassessments of developments like these with a concern for the average American citizen in mind.

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