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The Myth of Writer's Block:

Imagining American Moral Realism

A dissertation filed in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in English

by

Kevin Christopher Moore

2013

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Myth of Writer's Block:

Imagining American Moral Realism

by

Kevin Christopher Moore

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles 2013

Professor Eric Sundquist, Chair

The Myth of Writer's Block takes the prominent postwar cultural myth of the "blocked" writer and reexamines it as an objective historical phenomenon. Modern literary texts often emerge from psychological crises, or seek to capture fictional crises, but once a writer's reputation is marked by a *block myth*—a negative formulation that a writer has somehow failed to live up to popular or critical standards of production—literary and philosophical problems can take on the appearance of psychological calamity. Block myths take flight because they are marketable; an established author's work increases in cultural value when it is perceived to be scarce. Such myths rarely represent reality, however, and most American authors who are perceived to have encountered a significant block, including Joseph Mitchell, Henry Roth, and Ralph Ellison, published a considerable amount of influential work in their lifetimes. These writers moreover shared an uncanny interest in documenting precarious matters of social and political morality, often disregarding conventions of craft and narrative coherence. This is no thematic coincidence. While all of these writers struggled

independently through personal and intellectual crises, explaining the complex works they produced as specimens of mounting, monolithic block evades the unresolved moral questions—especially of race, ethnicity, class, and progress—they each confronted, however incompletely, in boldly realistic fictions and other accounts.

A block myth represents a transfer of the burden of social and political morality from society to the individual writer in crisis. This study identifies this phenomenon as a modern critical problem, resists it where necessary, and documents the specific American moral emergencies that block myths conceal. Part One tracks the history of block as a philosophical placeholder, tracing the concept in American literary history from William James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) through the midcentury psychoanalytic vogue and the rise of psychological realism as a dominant genre. Part Two provides a series of case studies or production profiles of three writers who have supposedly been blocked, Mitchell, Roth, and Ellison, examining how block myths frequently conceal or evade morally realistic literary gestures.

The dissertation of Kevin Christopher Moore is approved.

Michael Cohen

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Anna More

Eric Sundquist, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

For My Parents

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STRUCTURAL NOTE: This study is broken into two major parts, which pursue two distinct critical projects within the study's larger goal of explaining writer's block as a cultural myth. "Part One: Writer's Block since 1890" provides a general theoretical account of block as a critical and philosophical problem, and is made up of four major sections (some of which contain additional subsections, which are marked in the text as they occur). These major sectional divisions reflect movements in an accumulating argument rather than autonomous chapters, and my decision to refer

to them as "sections" rather than as chapters within the text is deliberate. "Part Two: Profiling

Production: Case Studies in American Moral Realism" provides specific case studies, examining in

depth three writers whose careers have been marked by block myths. Although the individual

components of Part Two are more autonomous than those contained in Part One, for consistency I

also call them "sections." They include a brief methodological note ("I. Disclosures") followed by

the case studies themselves on Joseph Mitchell, Henry Roth, and Ralph Ellison respectively.

Section numbering restarts in Part Two, and throughout the study I generally cross-reference

various subunits as "Part One, Section I," "Part Two, Section IV," etc. The Epilogue, "The

Retirement of Philip Roth," is an autonomous component.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EDUCATION

C.Phil. University of California, Los Angeles. 2010.

M.A. English. University of Arizona, Tucson. 2007.

B.A. English. University of Washington, Seattle. 2003.

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and Modern Language Association Conference, Scripps College, Claremont, CA. November

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"Reading *Reading Lacan*." New Directions in Critical Theory: The Intersections Conference, U of

Arizona, Tucson. April 2005

PART ONE

WRITER'S BLOCK SINCE 1890

"What is hard…is facing an idea as real" (562 n.).

William James, "Will." *The Principles of Psychology: Volume II*

I. Mʏᴛʜᴏs

A study seeking to explicate the meaning of "writer's block" as a modern American cultural myth—to reconsider block objectively, to historicize it—ought to know how to begin. This obligation emerges only in part from the abstract responsibility such an account may have to avoid suggesting it was at any point "blocked" itself, which presumably would strain its authority. An entirely practical reason why a study on block must outline a clear methodology and agenda is simply because block manifests in such a broad array of cultural registers, including literature, popular culture, professional criticism, pedagogy, as well as the study and practice of other arts. It can be very difficult to isolate its specific relevance to current discussions of literature, or for that matter to even know when one has isolated a meaningful conception of the myth. This holds true in general conversations about block as well as discussions of the work and biographies of specific authors. The *DSM-IV* may name "Disorder of Written Expression" as a classification of learning disorder,[1] the term "writer's block" may take on a familiar form of colloquial diagnosis, resembling expressions such as "smoker's cough," "swimmer's itch," and "writer's cramp," but block is not a single, definable psychological condition. Rather, block begins as a vague possibility, often as a question. *What happened to Henry Roth in the decades after the publication of* Call It Sleep*? Why did Ralph Ellison stop publishing novels after* Invisible Man*? Why would a writer once capable of writing a philosophically sophisticated book-length text subsequently go silent?* Questions such as these can lead to biographical, literary, and philosophical discoveries, but they cannot end in concrete conclusions until they abandon the myth

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[1] The American Psychiatric Association does not define "writer's block" in the *DSM-IV,* but its definition of "Disorder of Written Expression," which occurs among several learning disorders listed in the section "Disorders Usually First Diagnosed in Infancy, Childhood, or Adolescence," is worth citing since it outlines writing difficulty as a matter of relative deficiency: "The essential feature of Disorder of Written Expression is writing skills (as measured by an individually administered standardized test or functional assessment of writing skills) that fall substantially below those expected given the individual's chronological age, measured intelligence, and age-appropriate education" (51). The entry goes on to explain that relatively less is known about this disorder compared to other learning disorders, because "standardized tests in this area are less well developed than tests of reading or mathematical ability, and the evaluation of impairment in written skills may require a comparison between extensive samples of the individual's written schoolwork and expected performance for age and IQ" (52). According to the APA, "Disorder of Written Expression is rare when not associated with other Learning Disorders" (52).

and return to history, which in the study of literature usually means returning to the publication record and to literary texts themselves. Writer's block should be approached with as much skepticism as any other cultural myth of philosophical consequence—the quasi-scientific possibility of time travel, for instance, or more proximately the ethical question of free-will—and attuned to the difference between *what writer's block expresses as a collective wish* and *how it directs us to legitimate, objective critical questions about writers, their work, and literature in general.* Questions of block, like questions of time travel, have one foot in reality, and raise serious philosophical, ethical, and scientific considerations. Yet the myth always warps the resolution of such questions to some degree, implicitly advancing the theoretical amalgam on which they are predicated.

Writer's block is an extremely adaptable figure. Approaching it too broadly opens a free fall of substitutions. If one took block as a modern expression of the general problem of poetic genesis, for instance, it is possible to trace the myth all the way back to antiquity. In such an account, one might begin by comparing modern notions of ephemeral creativity to the classical myth of the muse, whose visits were capricious and who could depart. From there, one might examine Romantic typologies of poetic genius, which also persist into our time even as they, too, are usually treated with skepticism. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's distinctions in his *Biographia Literaria*, for instance, articulate lines between "the men of the greatest genius," such as Chaucer and Shakespeare, who are by nature "of calm and tranquil temper in all that related to themselves" because "they seem to have been either indifferent or resigned with regard to immediate reputation," and the instability of those who "possess more than mere talent…yet still want something of the creative and self-sufficing power of absolute genius" (164-5). Such descriptions may seem bound in outdated notions of transcendent literary authority, long put to rest by poststructuralist theories of literary authorship such as Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1967), where the author was replaced by linguistic multiplicity and readerly authority ("a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many

cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (148)), or Michel Foucault's subsequent conception in "What Is An Author?" (1969) of the cultural function of the "author" as "the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning," or "the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (118, 119). Yet in another sense one might argue the Romantic distinction between the unrattlable, methodical craftsman—on the American literary scene, this type might be exemplified by William Faulkner, Henry James, Toni Morrison, or Philip Roth—and the muse-dependent genius whose gifts are limited, frenzied, and can be spent (Truman Capote, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jack London, Sylvia Plath, David Foster Wallace) persists, at least in reductive dust-jacket biographies and popular biopics through which major literary figures are often approached today outside academic contexts. These popular, mythic types provide a context for why we talk about writer's block as a state of reduced output, even as they represent dubious romantic legacies. They do not, however, capture exactly what we mean today when we say a writer is *blocked*, a term that depends etymologically upon the rise of modern psychology, and which measures its impact on literature.

Nevertheless, there is also a risk of approaching writer's block too narrowly as a psychological phenomenon, of following the *OED* to the writings of psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler, who claimed to have coined the term "writer's block" in the late 1940s in a series of articles, published in psychoanalytic journals, that would form the backbone of the book *The Writer and Psychoanalysis* (1950).[2] This may be factually true, as Zachary Leader—the *OED*'s source for the Bergler citation—explains in his study on the history of writer's block (1-4). Although Bergler's research was mainly ignored in psychological circles (Leader 3), he attracted the attention of writers and critics, and the ensuing debate was the first high-profile critical exchange to dwell on writer's

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[2] Bergler makes his proprietary claim to "writer's block" at the beginning of a 1950 essay defending *The Writer and Psychoanalysis*. See "Does Writer's Block Exist?" *American Imago* 7.1 (Mar. 1950): 43-54.

block. Bergler was part of the Vienna circle of Freudians until he left for New York in the 1930s, but he broke with Freud's proscription against applying psychoanalysis to the creative mind long before the rise of literary theory in the 1960s and 1970s, where Freud was widely embraced as a model for reading literature.[3] Bergler argued that all creative writing, and in fact all creative professional achievement in general, could be explained psychoanalytically as sublimated oral regression. Like any "neurotic," Bergler explains, "The creative writer is also masochistic, but his elaboration on the basic conflict differs from that of the non-creative masochist in that it results in productivity. He acts, unconsciously, both roles—that of the corrected *giving* mother and the recipient child" (69, italics original). Writers seek to be "autarchic" (69), and through writing to achieve a "positive magic gesture" which unconsciously demonstrates through behavior "how I would like to be treated in childhood—nicely and lovingly. It represents an unconscious reproach directed toward the main upbringer" (28). Writers are people who use words to rectify psychological damage inflicted in infancy, before one had language. Bergler's equation is simple, "Words=milk" (70), and when the "milk" dries up, writer's block occurs, which can be rectified only by acknowledging the process has taken place. Becoming aware of this process of sublimation restores psychological equilibrium, and thus literary production. In Bergler's perception, all writing follows this formulation regardless of the topic, and all writers are potentially subject to block.

Bergler bases his theory on the extraordinary clinical claim to have cured some thirty-six writers of "block" with a one-hundred-percent success rate. Retrospectively, his clinical approach and ideas—as well as his neurotic, often combative explanations of them, which include downright hostile rejections of literary criticism—can be difficult to take seriously. Generally speaking, perhaps beginning as early as Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967), which parodies the possibility that a

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[3] In an essay on Dostoevsky, Freud famously wrote, "Before the problem of the creative artist analysis must, alas, lay down its arms" (Freud 177), an assertion Bergler expressly questions. See Bergler, Edmund. "Did Freud Really Advocate A 'Hands-Off' Policy toward Artistic Creativity?" *American Imago* 6.3 (Sept. 1949): 205-210.

novel could be a dramatic monologue by a patient to his psychoanalyst, American literary culture has

increasingly treated the practice of psychoanalysis with a grain of salt, although the theories of

Freud, Jacques Lacan, and others retain considerable influence in academic contexts. Even in his

own time, Bergler's theory was considered skeptically. As one especially harsh, anonymous *Time*

magazine reviewer wondered, "By the book's end, the reader has been taught to wonder what

compulsion makes a man set out to explain most of the world's literature as just an infant's whimper

for a bountiful teat" (qtd. in "Does Writer's Block Exist?" 49).[4] Yet as Leader points out, "Bergler's

strengths and weaknesses are important because they are representative and because the term *writer's*

block grows out of his sort of world; or to be precise, out of a world of largely American—it is a very

American term—psychoanalytic aesthetics" (4). Although Bergler was approached reluctantly even

in the 1940s and 1950s, he was well known, and his ideas provoked curiosity and genuine interest

among writers and critics. Both Lionel Trilling and Alfred Kazin responded to Bergler's book,[5] and

the novelist Mary McCarthy lifted unambiguously from Bergler as early as 1954 in her novel about a

New England artists' colony *A Charmed Life*.[6]

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[4] I cite Bergler's secondhand citation of the *Time* review rather than the review itself to draw a moment's attention to a feature of Bergler as a theorist of writer's block that, however intriguing, is outside the scope of the present study. After the publication of *The Writer and Psychoanalysis*, Bergler undertook a series of defenses of his book, the most extensive of which is "Does Writer's Block Exist?" which appeared in *American Imago* in March 1950. In this essay, Bergler cites at length reviewers who had criticized him and systematically, albeit not terribly convincingly, sets out to debunk their claims. The *Time* reviewer, according to Bergler, is for instance guilty of "Fallacy No. VIII: The 'Me, too'—Theory of Writer's Block" (48), which only roughly approximates the reviewers actual claims. A full appraisal of Bergler's various defenses would assuredly make for entertaining reading, including the peculiar "supplement" he added to the second edition of *The Writer and Psychoanalysis*: an audacious assault against literary criticism as an institution titled "Literary Critics Who Can Spell But Not Read." Since the present study does not actually trace the term to Bergler, for our purposes it will suffice to acknowledge that Bergler's relationship to literary criticism was a highly antagonistic one. Lurking in the background of his account of writer's block, Bergler's proprietary instinct regarding the term constructed in opposition to those who would dare to question his study poses a serious threat to his credibility, and should be taken as one of the conditions underlying writer's block's acceleration as a myth.

[5] See Kazin, Alfred. "The Language of Pundits." *Freud: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Perry Meisel. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981; and Trilling, Lionel. "Art and Neurosis." *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1970.

[6] Although Bergler does use the term "writer's block" in his study, and became increasingly proprietary in materials he published defending it, McCarthy picks up his more typical construction "writing block" to describe a writer character late in the novel (264). Although in this case the mention occurs only in passing, McCarthy's earlier description of an artist's "painting block" is almost certainly drawn from Bergler's theory: "The psychoanalyst had shown him, five summers ago, that he was full of unreleased aggressions; the cramp he had developed in his right hand cleared up like

Leader is correct to identify Bergler and his historical moment as an important point of inflection in the history of what we now call "writer's block." Yet Bergler's theory of "writer's block," as well as the mid-century "psychoanalytic aesthetics" Leader identifies out of which it "grows," are actually both expressions of a larger cultural phenomenon, which has propagated writer's block not simply as a contingent, quasi-scientific placeholder but as a cultural myth. In the US, psychological realism as the dominant form of realism and the myth of writer's block emerged together. Writer's block is not merely a twentieth-century expression of the question of the muse (although that is one of its genealogies), nor was it strictly coined by Bergler (although he may be, as Leader supposes, "its foremost theoretician" (2)). Rather block has been a looming, negative mythic possibility since the first stirrings of modernism, which, especially in the US, depended upon and promoted psychological intimacy as a litmus test for literary realism. In this general literary scenario, which might be paraphrased as an aesthetic of psychological determinism, works pursuing alternate realist modes—especially what I call in this study novelistic *moral realism*,[7] a kind of metafictional possibility reprioritizing the story of how works of literature come into existence—often become misidentified as temporarily or permanently "blocked" psychological novels. Instead of proposing definitions of what writer's block is, which would inevitably propagate the myth, this study examines the history of block and pursues instances where considering specific block myths directs us to interesting new findings about particular authors. As we shall see, such cases always require us to

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magic when the analyst proved to him that it was not a painting block but plain muscular tensions; the Coes had been having a little boundary dispute with their neighbor, and what Warren really wanted, underneath, it turned out, was to punch the fellow in the jaw. The analyst had opened his eyes to a lot of things; all moral values, to the analyst, were just rationalizations: ego massage. Warren's own values came from an identification with his mother and from being the class underdog in a sadistic military school, where they used to tear up his water colors and make him do dirty drawings. Any values he had learned that way were probably subjective and specious; no doubt he was just a bottled-up bully who overcompensated in the other direction. And yet you had to live with your values, Warren stuck to that, though he had been awfully interested to get the analyst's point of view" (44-5).

[7] My use of the term "moral realism" to describe a possible literary genre does not allude directly to the twentieth-century philosophical movement by the same name, although it does share its premise that there may be objective moral truths. For an introduction to the philosophical position, see Boyd, Richard N. "How to Be a Moral Realist." *Essays on Moral Realism*. Ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988. 181-228.

throw out the reductive possibility of writer's block—which presupposes a personal problem experienced by an individual in psychological crisis, rather than a question of *consent* to social and political morality—as a condition of obtaining access to misunderstood facts about writers and the cultural importance of their work.

A far more fruitful way to consider the question of block in an American context is as a late, special case of the free-will debate. In fact the earliest significant American usage of the term "block" as a philosophical placeholder occurs in William James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), which contains James's first in-depth explanation of his theory of the will.[8] Unlike some of the other terms James coined in his foundational study—a remarkable number of which have been widely appropriated, including "time-line," "pluralism," and most famously "stream of consciousness" (Richardson 306)—it does not appear possible to directly trace the appropriation of the term to general psychological contexts, where it appeared in a series of Depression-era behavioralist studies regarding "mental blocking" in workers,[9] or to its present usage. But the notion of cognitive "blocking" is important for James, connecting his theory of the continuity and impulsive nature of consciousness to his powerful conception of the impulsive yet educatable human will. Whether or not James's use of the literal euphemism "blocking" to describe a cognitive struggle is more than a historical coincidence, James's theory nevertheless represents an underappreciated, preemptive intervention in the literary and philosophical paradigm that has allowed the modern myth of block to flourish. Recovering James's use of the concept, including its until now unrecognized role in

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[8] Although it has its basis in *Principles*, James' better known engagement of the question of the will occurs in the 1896 lecture "The Will to Believe," in which James begins by declaring his will to be free. See James, William. "The Will to Believe." 1896. *Pragmatism and other Writings*. Ed. Giles Gunn. New York: Penguin, 2000. 198-218.

[9] Arthur G. Bills used the term blocking in a series of studies on mental published during the 1930s ("Blocking" 230). Although Bills does not cite James—just as Bergler does not cite Bills—it is worth noting that "block" existed as a description of a cognitive phenomenon in psychological discourse before Bergler, in the context of a series of studies considering how to improve the efficiency of mental workers. See "Blocking: A New Principle of Mental Fatigue." *American Journal of Psychology* 43.2 (March 1931): 230-245; "Some Causal Factors In Mental Blocking." *Experimental Psychology* 18.2 (April 1935): 172-185; and "Fatigue, Oscillation, and Blocks." *Experimental Psychology* 18.5 (August 1935): 562-573.

James's notion of the "stream of thought," is a way of rethinking the logic of modernism and its fallout on subsequent conceptions of literary authorship, production, as well as genre. Block, for James, was not a problem to be diagnosed and treated, but an inevitable, inherent cognitive trait, as typical and impulsive a feature of "[o]ur higher thought" as writing itself (*Vol II* 527).

Recovering James's definition will help us understand, moreover, why writer's block has come to take on its mythic form. Like the question of free-will—a key problem for James and Pragmatism, as well as for Pragmatism's backstage co-founder Charles Sanders Peirce—questions of writer's block are usually predicated in error on a set of layered cultural assumptions which mask the difficult, probably irresolvable moral questions the debate is really asking, questions about causality, authority, and social participation. To compare the free-will debate to writer's block directly, Peirce supposed, "stripped of verbiage," the basic philosophical question motivating discussions of free-will "is something like this: I have done something of which I am ashamed; could I, by an effort of the will, have resisted the temptation, and done otherwise?" (32). As Pierce points out, "this is not a question of fact, but only of the arrangement of facts" (32), a question of the argument one seeks to make with a particular set of facts underlying a morally problematic occurrence. The question of whether or not free-will exists, for Peirce, is the accidental, abstract byproduct of a rhetorical rather than truly philosophical quandary: in what ratio shall we blame ourselves for a shameful act, or alternately claim its inevitability, in order to *explain* the morality of that act? The question is only answerable on a case by case basis, and only incompletely, but "had it not been for this question"— the entirely pragmatic question of *how we explain* our behavior to ourselves and others—"the controversy" of free-will "would never have arisen" (32). Similarly, the predicating question underlying discussions of writer's block can be rephrased like this: a writer has failed in some way to either complete or publish a work of literature for which there is some reasonable expectation; could this writer, by an effort of the will, have done otherwise? There is no answer to the question that is

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not rhetorical, and in most cases speculative. When we discuss a writer in terms of block, we do so not to better understand that writer, but as a way of explaining—of *arguing*—the moral utility (or irrelevance) of that writer or a literary work.

Was Ralph Ellison blocked as a novelist after Invisible Man? The simple answer is no: block is a myth and Ellison was prolific, albeit in his own, unconventional way. The question remains meaningful, nevertheless, when taken as a contextualized rhetorical expression. Kenneth Warren supposed that the extent to which *Invisible Man* remains legible in the US marks the extent to which Jim Crow categorizations, including the categorization of African American literature, remain entrenched.[10] Someone interested in Warren's theory might ask about Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* productivity to wonder how the status of African American in the US changed during the years when Ellison wasn't publishing additional novels, which spanned the Civil Rights movement. Certainly there is something about Ellison's aesthetic which promoted a certain kind of political action and self-awareness; perhaps the rapidly shifting politics of the Civil Rights movement "pulled out the rug" from underneath him as a novelist, so to speak. Alternately, if someone interested in Ellison's nonfictional work in his two essay collections asked if Ellison were blocked, that would be a question about generic standards, and about what sort of public figure Ellison actually was. A career novelist should presumably write more than one novel (although the proceeds from *Invisible Man* gave Ellison an income for his entire lifetime, thus constituting a kind of career). But what if writing a novel was simply the right of passage through which Ellison became one of the late-twentieth-century's most prominent African American public intellectuals, a public role that does not necessarily require one to be a career novelist? In that case, *Invisible Man* should be taken in conjunction with his literary criticism and the other essays he published in two essay collections, his

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[10] As Warren explains, the US is still collectively "working…to make Ellison's novel a story of the world that was, and less an account of the world that still is. Success here just might be a bad thing for *Invisible Man*, but such a success would be a marvelous thing, indeed" (108). See Part Two, Section IV for an extended account of Warren's take on Ellison (185-186, 235).

public lectures, and his teaching positions at an array of universities and colleges (which would put him closely in line with his namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose literary reputation depended not on the publication of fiction or poetry but mainly on philosophical essays). Of these two possible meanings of the question "Did Ellison have writer's block after *Invisible Man*?" one asks *did cultural change disrupt Ellison's fictional process,* whereas the other asks the very different, metacritical question *how do our cultural standards of literary achievement and genre dictate our evaluation of Ellison*? Neither inflection really asks for a diagnosis of "block," but for a means to move beyond block in order to evaluate a writer's relationship to his culture. Block is thus a way of wondering about the complex relationship between writer and society—what might be called the literary contract—as much as it is a way of dwelling on individual authorial psychology. It is a mythic placeholder used to discuss cases where a writer's relationship to society has been problematic, incomplete, or otherwise misunderstood. Even if answering a question of block were to lead into the extreme recesses of an author's biography and process, even if one were to discover a writer paralyzed in severe psychological crisis at the end of that research—a writer epically unable to write because of some observable psychosis—a question about block is, in the first place, a prompt to rethink how a writer's work comes be published and accepted as a work of literature, and thus to rethink its historically situated cultural meaning. *Did this writer have writer's block* really asks *why do we imagine this writer has failed to communicate with his society*, which is always a rhetorical question that reveals as much about its asking subject as it does about its object.

The Myth of Writer's Block pursues questions of block in this primary, rhetorical sense.[11] It does so in order to imagine what writers whom we say have failed to communicate have in common in the context of twentieth-century and especially postwar American realism, where psychological intimacy remains the primary litmus test for realistic success and the myth of block runs rampant. Writers attracting questions of block actually share little in terms of their productivity when measured according to material output (i.e., page or publication count); this study addresses both Ralph Ellison, who published exactly one novel and Philip Roth, who has published dozens, both of whom have been discussed in terms of block, albeit the latter only very recently. Yet many of these writers follow an inclination to raise difficult questions of social and political morality, and without depending upon the conventions of the psychological novel to limit their representational liability. To the extent such writers succeed, they can be highly subversive. Many writers whom we label blocked, either temporarily or ultimately, actually see the novel not in the first place as a work of literary art, but rather as an act of philosophical communication and in many cases as a sophisticated instrument of moral education. Not all supposedly blocked writers fall into the category moral realists, but those who do illustrate an essential aspect of how all block myths function in the US: an entrenched block myth transfers the burden of questions of social and political morality from society to a writer in personal psychic crisis. Writer's block readily serves as a cultural alibi, as society's way of not dealing with writers who break realist conventions relating to morality, because it places the

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[11] It should be acknowledged that the primary title of this study, as well as some aspects of its skepticism echo psychiatrist Thomas Szasz's 1961 book *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*, the most prominent of a series of anti-psychiatric works published by Szasz over the course of his lifetime. Szasz saw relying on notions of mental illness to explain pathological behaviors as a collective denial of the "failure of historicism" in the social sciences, which for Szasz is mainly a reluctance to account for the "full and complicated interaction between observer and observed" (5). Obviously my argument takes a similar critical approach to writer's block when defined as mental illness, intersecting with aspects of Szasz's general critique insofar as it questions the rise of psychological determinism. However, I do not necessarily wish to imply that modern clinical psychology in general—which, with the rise of neuroscience, answers increasingly to empirically verifiable science—is predicated on myth, but rather to track how the acceptance of the primacy of psychological reality in American literary contexts has emerged as a historical problem. Whether or not the rise of modern clinical psychology in general displaces individual responsibility is an intriguing social question, and I acknowledge that some of my conclusions will inevitably extend into its arena, but the present study takes it up mainly to understand its impact on literature and to rethink the possibility of the realist contract in American contexts.

burden of achieving literary recognition on the hands of the individual writer. In fact literary production and literary recognition might better be thought of as public miracles, remarkable rhetorical coincidences of the individual will and a receptive audience.

As an inevitable psychological event, "block" is, or might as well be, real, and not just for William James circa 1890. Education theorist Mike Rose, in the influential compositionist study *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension* (1984), demonstrates with considerable empirical evidence that block can be a useful metaphor for describing how otherwise proficient writers observably committed to a specific writing task can still fail to complete that task. For teachers of writing, block provides a pragmatic means of discussing a whole class of writing problems—such as upholding rigid "rules" or engaging in "premature editing" (71, 72-3)—that often go unacknowledged because they occur in ostensibly competent students.[12] But when we speak of block as a condition afflicting the literary imagination, especially in the cases of established novelists who have already proven their ability to produce and moreover negotiate the publication of book-length, prose works, which have subsequently (and, from the perspective of a large majority of the population, astonishingly) been recognized by a wide audience, we speak not in the terms of cognitive block, but in the rhetoric of a cultural myth. This myth's acceleration is a byproduct of the contract of psychological realism, which I propose is the dominant form realism has taken in twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century

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[12] Rose's book was a landmark work in the interdisciplinary field of rhetoric and composition, and it sparked a debate on writer's block and its role in what is known as "process pedagogy" at a moment when the influence of rhetoric and composition was first rising within and across humanities departments at US universities. Since the initial publication of Rose's study, which was recently rereleased in a second edition, it might even be said the main purpose of university writing programs has become to help students manage and overcome various blocks in the practice of writing (assuming that most students arrive at the university with basic literacy skills). That these concerns should have taken on their own subfield, where the teaching of writing and the mitigation of student block is now usually considered outside the realm of literary studies, is an interesting development. As Mark McGurl shows in *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, the historical and current configurations of English departments are well worth considering as a way of rethinking literary paradigms (see *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010). It would be worth extending such considerations to question from a literary perspective how the splintering of rhetoric and composition from literary studies has impacted pedagogy, departmental politics, as well as critical methodologies. For other selections on student block from the 1980s debate, see Rose's subsequent collection *When A Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing Process Problems*. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guilford Press, 1985.

American literature, and the functional engine of modernism. Where a novel can *be* a psychological transcript, the inability to continue becomes an individual writer's psychological problem, rather than a problem of consent to one's society; the acceptance of this contract promotes the myth of block. But psychological realism is a dominant paradigm, not an exclusive one, and some American writers who are perceived to have encountered monumental blocks are actually not blocked psychological realists but innovators of alternate realisms, which engage difficult moral questions of a social or political nature *without* abandoning textuality and metafiction. Psychological realism is actually formalized idealism, and a departure from the explicit formal concerns realistic novels have thematized historically. As a result of its rise since the beginning of the modernist period, novels in the twentieth century have managed to explore psychological processes with sometimes uncanny verisimilitude. To assume *a priori* that novelistic representation should be psychological—cognitive art rendered from the processes of the mind—is nevertheless to misunderstand the history of American novelistic realism and to limit its present pragmatic and philosophical potential.

Fiction can be psychological and moral at the same time, but not without finding the means to negotiate the cultural tension between those terms, which in our time are frequently drawn as a distinction between the *individual writer in private psychic crisis* and the *member of society in public moral crisis*. As I propose in Part One, Section IV ("Realism"), as a genre, psychological realism resolves this tension through a contractual emphasis of the former term, creating novels that aspire to be psychological artifacts. Such works place the question of how to resolve the public moral crises they nevertheless suggest—as well as the transmission of crisis, and thus literary production—squarely onto the reader or critic (there are many examples of this; mine, chosen for their thematic, formal, and chronological range, are William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1971), and Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011)). In contrast, the authors I address at length in the case studies of Part Two of this study all

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resolve psycho-moral tension by alternate means, and for it have attracted the myth of block. As we shall see, when this tension cannot be resolved by a writer who has once managed the trick, as in the case of Henry Roth, we reduce it to a private block to limit the failure's social fallout, a damaging diagnosis whose aura can persist into an author's subsequent accomplishments and recognition. When it is resolved by unconventionally exposing a realistic problem's public, moral dimensions—in works such as Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Philip Roth's morality novels (*American Pastoral*, *The Human Stain*)—we sometimes appeal against logic to the myth of block to resist a moral exposure's proliferation. And when the philosophical problem of public literary authority and achievement is addressed directly in works of creative nonfiction, a realistic novel form that overturns the pretense of fictionality entirely in order to invert the tension between society and individual—as in the cases of Joseph Mitchell, "Joe Gould's Secret" (1964) or Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (1966)—a question about block becomes a question about the stakes of interpersonal identification, where paralysis could be contagious.

First, however, let us explore in greater depth the history of block as a philosophical question, as well as the present shape of the myth.

II. KAIROS: WRITER'S BLOCK *IN* 1890

Although the phrase "writer's block" is usually attributed to Bergler, whose bold

psychoanalytic theory certainly marked a moment of acceleration in block as a cultural myth, the

notion of cognitive "blocking" actually has an older, unrecognized place in American intellectual

history. The earliest prominent usage of the concept in a psychological context occurs in James's *The*

Principles of Psychology, which is a much better starting point for understanding what the existence of

the modern myth of block suggests about the assumptions of modern American literary culture.

Today, James is best known for his lean, later volume *Pragmatism* (1907), where he outlines a general,

widely applicable philosophy in concise terms, but *Principles* established James's fame and earned him

an international reputation. An imposing, two-volume opus running nearly 1400 pages, and yet

hardly the dry psychology textbook its title may suggest to the modern reader, *Principles* is a highly

imaginative collection of theories of human consciousness, experience, and the will. Replete with

figurative language and inventive examples and applications, it is best read as a work of literature,

not unlike the generically innovative literary philosophy of writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson,

Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau, which helped American literature prove its stature

internationally during the mid-nineteenth century. Although not a novel or a poem, in the words of

Jacques Barzun *Principles* can be thought of as "an American masterpiece which, quite like *Moby Dick*,

ought to be read from beginning to end at least once by every person professing to be educated. It is

a masterpiece in the classic and total sense—no need of a descriptive or limiting word before or

after" (qtd. in Richardson 302).

Barzun's hyperbole is more or less in line with how James himself considered the work upon

its completion. In a letter to his novelist brother Henry written shortly after finalizing the proofs of

Principles in August 1890, James expressed considerable enthusiasm for the work's literary merits,

supposing that the year of its publication would constitute a milestone in American literature, in

conjunction with Henry's novel *The Tragic Muse* and William Dean Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*: "With that work [*Hazard*], your tragic muse, and last, *but by no means least*, my psychology, all appearing in it, the year 1890 will be known as the great epocal year in American literature" (243, italics original). Obviously James did not read the palm of history as well as he thought he could in making this immodest remark to his brother. Of the three works he lists here, none of them register as epoch-making works of literature today, and more likely will seem late hangovers of older, perhaps outdated conceptions of literary innovation written on the eve of modernism, as well as the global armed conflicts and the technological and social advances that would come to define twentieth-century American civilization and shape its literature. The claim nevertheless captures a unique, kairotic moment in American literary history worth marking, for it was perhaps the first and last moment when a work of Emersonian imaginative philosophy could be presented without disclaimer as "epocal" literature alongside two works of uncharacteristic American social realism. Into this over-optimistic, pre-modernist, unspecialized context—where psychology remained a subfield of philosophy, where philosophy was literature, where Americans were writing socially realistic novels—James imagined "block" not as an externally imposed impasse or an illness but as a normal aspect of the will's role in "our higher thought."

James's deploys the euphemism "blocking" in two of the most ambitious aspects of *Principles*: his metaphor of consciousness as a "stream," which became the most widespread popular epistemology of psychologically realistic modernist texts after the British writer May Sinclair silently appropriated the term in 1918, and his thesis on the will, "where *Principles* peaks" in the words of James biographer Robert D. Richardson (307). The *OED* only partially recognizes this etymology, citing James's later, more prominent use of the euphemism "blocking" in his discussion on the will,

which occurs in Volume II.[13] Since this second passage constitutes a highly-embedded prolepsis at one of the most important transitions in James's chapter, where "blocking" provides a momentary glimpse of an upcoming theory of the "obstructed will" (546), let us begin by moving through this aspect of James's theory slowly, to reproduce its contextualized meaning as accurately as possible. After restoring this more general, difficult usage, I will show how block fits into the "stream of consciousness" theory, how it links James's notion of consciousness to his discussion of volition, and how James's definition of block bears on the present study and twentieth-century literature at large though the various misappropriations of "stream of consciousness" in literary modernism. By recovering James's theory, I argue, it is possible to glimpse an earlier philosophical paradigm where *psychological crisis* and *moral crisis* were indistinguishable. Cognitive block was real for James, and incurable because he saw it as a constitutional part of human psychology related to ideological consent instead of personal, inner disorder. Through James's theory, it becomes possible to imagine retroactively an alternate model for inner experience where block and its resolution are both pivotal aspects of creative writing and all higher thought, where the will can—with certain difficulty—be educated.

Block and the "Will"

James begins Chapter XXVI "Will" with an anecdote, which at once captures his innovative theory and demonstrates his gift for vivid, literary illustration:

> The other day I was standing at a railroad station with a little child, when an express-train went thundering by. The child, who was near the edge of the platform, started, winked, had his breathing convulsed, turned pale, burst out crying, and ran frantically towards me and hid his face. I have no doubt that this youngster was almost as much

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[13] The *OED*'s James reference predates Leader's introduction of Bergler to the dictionary. In fact Leader cites it in a footnote as "noteworthy," although he elects not to take it up (Leader 254 n.8).

astonished by his own behavior as he was by the train, and more than I was, who

stood by. (487)

For the child, who either had never witnessed an express train passing at high speed or had not

become accustomed to the experience, internal, involuntary sensations are as surprising as the train

itself. This demonstrates two things, according to James. First, it shows how estranged we are not

only from the sensations that come to us from the outside world, but from the sensations that arise

in our own bodies: our capacity to "convuls[e]" and "burst out crying" is a phenomenon beyond our

control. It is also James's way of broaching the possibility that if "voluntary action" exists—in this

case, voluntary action might be reassuring oneself when confronted with a rushing train—in the first

place it cannot be "novel," since "no creature not endowed with divinatory power can perform an

act voluntarily for the first time" (487). Since "we are no more endowed with prophetic vision of

what movements lie in our power, than we are endowed with prophetic vision of what sensations we

are capable of receiving," then obviously "[w]e learn all our possibilities"—psychological, social,

biological—"by the way of experience" (487). Insofar as voluntary action is possible, experience is

the means to learning how it can be achieved: "*a supply of ideas of the various movements that are possible left*

in the memory by experiences of their involuntary performance is thus the first prerequisite of the voluntary life" (488,

italics original). How one becomes accustomed to an experience such as the rush of a passing train,

how one learns to stand before it unalarmed rather than become terrified at its alien mechanical

menace, can only be worked out retrospectively.

Following this opening provocation, James engages the primary research of other

psychologists on the nature of human volition, gradually chipping away at broadly held psychological

assumptions that have their basis in Hume: that the will is enacted through one-directional, outward

channels of "innervation," and that "we are conversant with the outward results of our volition, and

not with the hidden inner machinery of nerves and muscles which are what it primarily sets at work"

(499). This is a mistake, James supposes: "[w]hoever says that in raising his arm he is ignorant of how many muscles he contracts, in what order of sequence, and in what degrees of intensity, expressively avows a colossal amount of unconsciousness of the processes of motor discharge" (499). The processes of basic motor action may be impulsive, and broken down into their component parts they may be exceedingly complex and strange—in some cases unknowable. Yet acknowledging this situation is essential. Neither the impulsiveness of human action nor its unconscious complexity authorizes us not to make the attempt to understand its processes.

When the prolepsis mentioning "blocking" finally arrives, some forty pages have passed since the example of the child at the railroad station. In this long, opening sequence of the chapter, James treads lightly, only periodically hinting at the philosophical inversion he is about to perform, where volition will be presented as the *culmination* of psychological processes, not a factor submerged in their origin. The "blocking" euphemism arrives as one of the last of these hints, amid his explanation of basic "ideo-motor" action, where "the determining condition of the unhesitating and resistless sequence of the act" is redefined as "*the absence of any conflicting notion in the mind*" (523, italics original). Here, James attempts to extend his theory beyond "simple" situations of action to those where it can seem as if an "express fiat" or "the neutralization of the antagonistic and inhibitory idea is required" (526). But he pauses, because first an important misperception must be dismantled. According to James, "the popular notion that mere consciousness as such is not essentially a forerunner of activity, that the latter must result from some superadded 'will-force,'" is actually "not the norm," but rather "a very natural inference from those special cases in which we think of an act for an indefinite length of time without the action taking place" (526). Although there are "special cases" where action is delayed, our reluctant cogitations during the delay have little to do with our final will, because James supposes that "consciousness is *in its very nature impulsive*" (526 italics original). In those cases where action is delayed, which we typically misunderstand and which are

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actually not the norm, "blocking" becomes a useful concept. Here is the full passage highlighted by the *OED,* where James repeats the term three times in a single paragraph, foreshadowing his upcoming discussion on how the will operates in "higher thought":

> When the blocking is released we feel as if an inward spring were let loose, and this is the additional impulse or *fiat* upon which the act effectively succeeds. We shall study anon the blocking and its release. Our higher thought is full of it. But where there is no blocking, there is naturally no hiatus between the thought-process and the motor discharge. (527, italics original)

Blocking is not disorder, but a component of the processes of voluntary action. Even in the context of our "higher thought" it is nothing more than the product of "antagonistic thoughts" (526-7). Although the temporal delay between the inception of some actions and their willed completion gives us the impression that the will is a matter of decision, in actuality this is not so: all action is impulsive because consciousness is impulsive, and, as James explains much later in the chapter, "attention" is the primary variable by which we exert effort ("*Effort of attention is thus the essential phenomenon of will*" (562, italics original)). "Blocking" does not impede the will, rather "the terminus of the psychological process is volition" (567). In the question of volition, there is no getting outside the impulsive will—"The whole drama is a mental drama" (564)—although such a will is subject to explosion (537), obstruction (548), and other natural paroxysms.

"Blocking" is thus for James merely the impression—the idea—our consciousness generates as a product of the discontinuity between what we *impulsively* imagine ourselves capable of doing and what we actually, *also impulsively* do. While this impression may provide an "additional impulse or *fiat*" to whatever impulse we wind up following in the end, this is a coincidence, and it does not change the fact that all action is impulsive, including our consent to the impression of blockage. James's best example of this, in which he imagines there may be in "miniature form the data for an entire

psychology of volition" (525), is lying in bed on a cold morning in a room without a fire and trying to muster the will to get up—surely a common experience during nineteenth-century Cambridge winters. The illustration is worth citing in its entirety, in part to demonstrate further the imaginative excellence of *Principles* as a work of literature. Lying in bed,

> [w]e think how late we shall be, how the duties of the day will suffer; we say, "I *must* get up, this is ignominious," etc.; but still the warm couch feels too delicious, the cold outside too cruel, and resolution faints away and postpones itself again and again just as it seemed on the verge of bursting the resistance and passing over into the decisive act. Now how do we *ever* get up under such circumstances? If I may generalize from my own experience, we more often than not get up without any struggle or decision at all. We suddenly find that we *have* got up. A fortunate lapse of consciousness occurs; we forget both the warmth and the cold; we fall into some revery connected with the day's life, in the course of which the idea flashes across us, "Hollo! I must lie here no longer"—an idea which at that lucky instant awakens no contradictory or paralyzing suggestions, and consequently produces immediately its appropriate motor effects. It was our acute consciousness of both the warmth and the cold during the period of struggle, which paralyzed our activity then and kept our idea of rising in the condition of *wish* and not of *will*. The moment these inhibitory ideas ceased, the original idea exerted its effects. (524-525, italics original)

Dwelling on getting up does not necessarily precipitate action, but merely provides a context for action, which, only once other antagonistic thoughts momentarily "lapse," occurs "without any struggle or decision at all." Not "blocking," but getting up itself becomes the barely recoverable volitional mystery, and aspects of it may be an ultimate mystery ("The *impulsive quality* of mental

states is an attribute behind which we cannot go" (551, italics original)). The dwelling in bed, by contrast, is the familiar, relatable experience.

There are already several implications of this theory for our discussion of writer's block. In the first place, by relegating the relation "*wish*" and "*will*" to the realm of coincidence rather than causality, inaction becomes utterly naturalized. Where "the terminus of the psychological process is volition," the desire to write precedes but does not necessarily dictate whatever writing actually takes place because it, too, is the product of the will. The will—and by extension all human activity, including writing—is thus exceptionally strange in the relatively rare cases where we do have a conscious wish: it becomes the accidental product of hard to recognize impulses such as a "lapse of consciousness" or accidental, digressive "revery." For James, psychological "blocking"—an impasse created by an accumulation of "antagonistic thoughts"—would moreover become an inevitable part of the writing process, however ultimately unrelated to whether and how a work of writing actually gets produced (let alone recognized as a successful act of communication). Whereas the myth of writer's block normalizes the act of writing and supposes that block is a kind of disorder, when James uses the term "blocking" to describe an aspect of the will the relation between blocking and action itself is normalized: the experience of "blocking" becomes, like writing itself, secondary to the will, which thus becomes a far more complex thing. If writer's block follows this logic, then it is hardly a cognitive disorder, and merely an impression generated by the passage of time in cases where one has an impulsive *wish* to write but the impulsive writing itself—the *sine qua non* of which is the act of writing—is delayed.

Viewing James's theory retrospectively, from a critival vantage point inevitably influenced by a century dominated by text-centered reading strategies such as those associated with the New Criticism and poststructuralist textualism, it may be noted that James's remarks are general rather than specifically focused on writing. Simply rolling out of bed on a cold morning is not the same

thing as writing a novel, or for that matter writing a work of philosophy—how exactly does writing differ in terms of its relative status in the context of Jamesian volition? The short answer to this question is that for James, it doesn't: the will functions "by *consents* or *non-consents* and not by words" (579), and writer's block would be a basic volitional "non-consent" rather than a condition specific to writing. Nevertheless, there are two instances where James uses the example of his own writing to make a point about volition. The first comes during a sub-discussion where James discards the possibility that "pleasure and pain" are actually "the springs of action" (549). James quickly refutes this possibility; all action is in the first place "ideo-motor action," and recognizing action that is specifically the result of "pleasure" or "pain," like temporarily blocked action, only occurs "under rarely realized conditions" when taken in the context of action in general (553). He goes on to list several activities illustrating this point:

> As I do not breathe for the pleasure of the breathing, but simply find that I *am* breathing, so I do not write for the pleasure of the writing, but simply because I have once begun, and being in a state of intellectual excitement which keeps venting itself in that way, find that I *am* writing still. Who will pretend that when he idly fingers his knife-handle at the table, it is for the sake of any pleasure which it gives him, or pain which he thereby avoids. We do all these things because at the moment we cannot help it; our nervous systems are so shaped that they overflow in just that way; and for many of our idle or purely "nervous" and fidgety performances we can assign absolutely *no reason* at all. (553)

The "overflow" of "our nervous systems" is what causes all events of the will, from fidgeting with a butter-knife at the dinner table to writing material for *The Principles of Psychology*. Although the conditions making possible a "state of intellectual excitement" are somewhat murky in this example, James's expression that it is possible to "find" oneself "writing still" suggest it is not carelessly

chosen: even writing is a fundamentally impulsive act, where one needn't be consciously aware of every pen stroke or dictional choice as one makes it. If it seems otherwise, a fundamentally different class of action, that is a problem for the observer, who "must remember…that from a physiological point of view a gesture, an expression of the brow, or an expulsion of breath are movements as much as an act of locomotion is. A king's breath slays as well as an assassin's blow" (527-528).

The second reference to writing James makes in his volition chapter, which is somewhat more revealing, occurs just a few pages later in the subsection "Will Is a Relation between the Mind and Its 'Ideas.'" Here, James reasserts his point that volition is the terminus of psychology in ideas which carry out physiological movements:

> The *willing* terminates with the prevalence of the idea; and whether the act then follows or not is a matter quite immaterial, so far as the willing itself goes. I will to write, and the act follows. I will to sneeze, and it does not. I will that the distant table slide over the floor towards me; it also does not. My willing representation can no more instigate my sneezing-centre than it can instigate the table to activity. But in both cases it is as true and good willing as it was when I willed to write. In a word, volition is a psychic or moral fact pure and simple, and is absolutely completed when the stable state of the idea is there. The supervention of motion is a supernumerary phenomenon depending on executive ganglia whose function lies outside the mind. (560)

Again, the human will terminates with attention, with "the stable state of the idea" rather than the completion of an act. In a note to this passage, this is how James literally defines the difference between a "wish" and a "will": "When one knows that he has no power, one's desire of a thing is called a *wish* and not a will" (n. 560, italics original). Notice how writing is, in this instance, an example of an act that directly follows the will, and an especially convenient one for James who

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presumably knows the massive text before his reader serves as evidence of an act he has successfully willed. His point, however, is that the will does not require a material product to be considered complete. "The prevalence of an idea" is the evidence of the will, not necessarily the material consummation of the will. "What is hard," as James imagines in a footnote later in the chapter, "is facing an idea as real." (562 n.). Whether the idea is one's wish to sneeze, one's wish to telepathically move a table, or one's wish to write, an idea's prevalence in the mind is a kind of action, and thus already subsequent to the will. "The essential achievement of the will…when it is most 'voluntary,' is to *attend* to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind" (561).

For James, action and inaction—of which writing and writer's block are simply types—are both normal, utterly typical products of the will, which is inherently impulsive. Even though writer's block seems opposed to writing, in this formulation it is actually as impulsive as writing itself, although the impression we have that it is an impasse, occupying time better spent writing, can be a source of anxiety, and perhaps generate additional "fiat" once it has been overcome (not unlike the anxiety one might have attempting to will oneself to sneeze, which would be met with greater relief than usual if one managed, coincidentally, to sneeze). The power of this theory lies in its normalizing, democratizing potential. In fact mistaking inaction for an essential disorder is, for James, nothing short of "[t]he moral tragedy of human life," which "comes almost wholly from the fact that the link is ruptured which normally should hold between vision of the truth and action, and that this pungent sense of effective reality will not attach to certain ideas" (547). Where conceptions of action and inaction are both products of an impulsive, barely knowable will rather than disorders of the will's instantiating genius, it becomes possible to say (forgiving the gendered language), "Men do not differ so much in their mere feelings and conceptions. Their notions of possibility and their ideals are not as far apart as might be argued from their differing fates" (547). Perceiving one's impotence, in fact, produces special "moral insight" in James's view:

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No class of [people] have better sentiments or feel more constantly the difference

between the higher and the lower path in life than the hopeless failures, the

sentimentalists, the drunkards, the schemers, the 'dead-beats,' whose life is one long

contradiction between knowledge and action, and who, with full command of

theory, never get to holding their limp characters erect. No one eats of the fruit of

the tree of knowledge as they do; as far as moral insight goes, in comparison with

them, the orderly and prosperous philistines whom they scandalize are sucking

babes. (547)

While James differentiates between inert "moral knowledge" and "ideal or moral action," which is

"action in the line of greatest resistance" (549), this is a matter of defining a universal principle

rather than differentiating personal character traits. For James, moral action is *by definition* a matter of

triumphing over propensities (rather than accepting one's sensations), and thus exceptionally

difficult rather than typical. Yet it proves individual talent only insofar as it suggests some individuals

may have differing psychological negative "propensities," the vast majority of which are experiential

and determined by psychological coincidence—what might better be called the fortunate coexistence

of luck, labor, and attention—rather than biological or cosmic fate.

The applicability of James's theory to a working definition of writer's block (and theory of

literary production in general) is by now obvious, but the theory reaches its greatest potential

relevance near the end of his chapter. Here, James upholds the highest standards when it comes to

the stakes of human existence: "'*Will you or won't you have it so*?' is the most probing question we are

ever asked; we are asked it every hour of the day, and about the largest as well as the smallest, the

most theoretically as well as the most practical, things. We answer by *consents* or *non-consents* and not

by words" (579, italics original). At the same time he argues in favor of the basic experiential

continuity between the "heroic mind," capable of facing the "dreadful object" and the "dark

abysses" of the world (578), and those "hopeless failures" that nevertheless possess considerable "moral knowledge." Overcoming volitional paralysis, for James, is thus not a problem of the will itself—everyone possesses an operational will—but of "the will's education…the problem of how the idea of a movement can arouse the movement itself," which is a matter of accepting that "[*r*]*eflex, instinctive,* or *random execution* of a *movement* must…precede its voluntary execution" (580, italics original). The question is one of how an action's desirable "effect" can be refigured as its "cause" (586), which, since we must experience an action accidentally before we can will it to take place automatically, can only be a matter of objectively trusting one's intellectual faculties—including one's hesitations and inherent prejudices—and opening oneself to an objective process of trial and error.

The Jamesian will imagines the human mind as an arena where the impression of volitional difficulty or "blocking" always has a role. For James, however, "blocking" is not a personal disorder of the will, as it is in the context of our present, disabling psychoanalytic myth of writer's block, but a normal feature of moral action, which occurs both when we come up against the absolute limitations of the physical world (I cannot move that table across the room by an act of will) *and* when we encounter the obscurely "unwelcome object" (564). The power of this theory lies in its assumption that the experience of volitional difficulty is the normal state when it comes to moral innovation, even as it simultaneously proposes that such difficulty ought to be embraced:

> Though the spontaneous drift of thought is all the other way, the attention must be kept strained on that one object until at last it *grows*, so as to maintain itself before the mind with ease. This strain of the attention is the fundamental act of the will. And the will's work is in most cases practically ended when the bare presence to our thought of the naturally unwelcome object has been secured. (564)

When, through education and practice, writing becomes an intuitive act—when it becomes "ideo-motor" rather than wished for action—the problem of imagining the "naturally unwelcome object," and finding the means to render it in the medium of language, is the only problem any writer ever actually has. In James's terms, consenting to that process is what separates the successful from the unsuccessful writer, although the origin and nature of the "unwelcome object," obviously, will have great variation. The outside observer—especially the literary critic, or any other representative of the interpretive elite—has a social and moral obligation to recognize the high probability of a level of ideological "unwelcomeness," whether cultural, historical, or biological, that may permanently overload an individual writer's capacity of consent, and cultivate a permanent habit of turning away. This does not, however, alter for James the inherent role of blocking in higher thought as a perfectly natural impression, and the cultivation of attention as the only moral behavior: "*To sustain a representation, to think*, is, in short, the only moral act, for the impulsive and the obstructed, for sane and lunatics alike" (566, italics original). As William Carlos Williams put it similarly in the essay supplement to his famous poem "XXII" in *Spring and All* (usually called "The Red Wheel Barrow"), there is quite literally "no confusion—only difficulties" (226)).

Block and "The Stream of Thought"

As a literary historical tool, the advantage of James's theory lies in its capacity to radically normalize the question of writer's block. Where all consciousness is by nature impulsive, where writing is considered a form of action that can become impulsive "ideo-motor action," writer's block and writing exist in much closer proximity than in the pathological terms of the myth. The difference between a productive writer and an unproductive writer thus becomes a matter of circumstance rather than of kind, and, in the cases where a "block" appears to come to a once productive writer, an occasion to dwell on the cultural, historical, or biological circumstances that

might have subsequently presented a "naturally unwelcome object." But the occasion to invoke James now, in a study on how writer's block has functioned as a cultural myth in the twentieth- and early-twenty-first centuries, actually emerges from the concept's entanglement in James's discussion of the "stream of consciousness" in *Volume I* (Chapter IX: "The Stream of Thought"), an earlier usage of "block" than the *OED*'s James citation of "blocking" in the chapter on the will. This usage helps link James's notion of consciousness as a "stream" to his theory of the will, but more importantly it provides a context for rethinking how both "stream of consciousness" and writer's "block" function in our present cultural vocabulary. Like James's use in the case of his discussion of the will, the usage of "block" in chapter IX is embedded, and must be teased out slowly and by degrees. Preliminarily, however, let us say that "writer's block" in this context does not *obstruct* the "stream of consciousness" or "thought." Rather, it occurs as a means of explaining the difference between a complete and incomplete thought. By showing how James's conception of "block" as it occurs in Chapter XXVI already exists in the "stream of consciousness" discussion, it becomes possible to witness how the two terms are bound together, and to begin to observe the peculiarity of psychological realism as a dominant realist literary form.

Like writer's block itself, most current deployments of the euphemism "stream of consciousness" to describe a psychological fiction—especially works associated with modernism and classified as formally inventive, psychological novels—are mythic, approximate, and uninformed of the origins of the term. The proof for this is easy to obtain: ask any undergraduate twentieth-century literature survey to intuitively characterize a book such as *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Sound and the Fury*, or for that matter *Portnoy's Complaint*, and at least one student—and usually several—will silently cite William James (the existence of whom they will be at best vaguely aware). These same students will likely have difficulty parsing what the figure "stream of consciousness" actually implies, since taken out of context it only signifies a general state of mental flux. But James was silently and only roughly

cited in the very first appropriation of the term to a literary context, when the British writer and philosopher May Sinclair used the phrase "stream of consciousness" to describe the novels of Dorothy Richardson in a review issued in both *The Egoist* and *The Little Review* in April 1918. Sinclair had considerable familiarity with *Principles* and knew well the implications and limitations of her citation.[14] In the second paragraph of the review, she openly expresses reservations about applying nineteenth-century philosophy to twentieth-century literature: ("Only a live criticism can deal appropriately with a live art. And it seems to me that the first step towards life is to throw off the philosophic cant of the XIXth Century" (3)). She moreover abandoned the term in her subsequent writings and philosophy on the basis that it was a slippery figure with the potential to transform the narrator or speaker of a work of literature into a mere "passive receiver" for "sensory impressions" (Gillespie 140). But in 1918, in the same issue of *The Little Review* containing a chapter from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Sinclair introduced James's figure without reservation in praise of Richardson's novels:

> I have heard other novelists say that they have no art and no method and no form, and that it is this formlessness that annoys them. They say that they have no beginning and no middle and no end, and that to have form a novel must have an end and a beginning and a middle…There is a certain plausibility in what they say, but it depends on what constitutes a beginning and a middle and an end. In this series there is no drama, no situation, no set scene. Nothing happens. It is just life going on and on. *It is Miriam Henderson's* [a Richardson character] *stream of consciousness going on and on.* And in neither [book of this series] is there any grossly discernible beginning or middle or end.

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[14] In addition to her fiction and poetry, Sinclair published two books on the limitations of nineteenth-century philosophy, including *A Defense of Idealism* (1917) and *The New Idealism* (1922), both of which refute the metaphysical idealism of what she called the "new realists"—including James, Samuel Butler, Henri Bergson, Bertrand Russell, S. Alexander, and Alfred North Whitehead (Gillespie 135).

In identifying herself with this life which is Miriam's stream of consciousness

Miss Richardson produces her effect of being the first, of getting closer to reality

than any of our novelists who are trying so desperately to get close. (6, italics mine)

Richardson's successful rendering of a character's "stream of consciousness"—here defined as "just

life going on and on," where "[n]othing happens"—is what makes her novels "closer to reality" than

those of her contemporaries. Regardless of the complexity of Sinclair's understanding of James's

theory, this first deployment of "stream of consciousness" in a literary context bears the

understanding that has inflected its appropriation as a whole: it is a way of formalizing

incompleteness. For Sinclair, the idea of consciousness as a "stream" suggests "not only flux but

also unity" (Gillespie 137).

In fact James uses the metaphor of consciousness as a "stream" to a very different end. For

him it is another means to normalize the mind's strangeness, and moreover to account for its

isolation, which he presents as a fraught moral and intellectual problem rather than a condition to be

embraced. The "stream" metaphor emerges to account for the ephemeral, shifting nature of

consciousness, and to explain its appearance of absolute continuity "to itself" (239). Even the deep

sleeper or anesthetized patient wakes up with a feeling of continuity, James suggests, which really

should come as no surprise: consciousness is by definition an isolated "community of self," which a

"time-gap cannot break in twain" (239). This is a necessary consideration rather than an enabling

possibility, needed not to propose an alternate model for consciousness but to barely mitigate "the

breach from one mind to another…perhaps the greatest breach in nature" (237). In short, James

deploys his famous metaphor rhetorically rather than descriptively, to underwrite a philosophical

method and vision rather than to propose a comprehensive, serious model for consciousness. It

mainly promotes what might be called an *abductory* method of understanding consciousness, [15] which presumes and participates in a plurality of absolutely isolated, "fringe" mental experiences as a means of developing a workable definition of human reality (276). The "stream of consciousness" only proposes individual psychic "unity" as a way of discussing the utter miracle of meaningful interpersonal communication and objective sense, especially in cases of "higher thought," which is additionally subject to experiences such as blockage.

Taken literally and out of context, James's initial deployment of the "stream" metaphor can perhaps seem consistent with Sinclair's citation and its common usage. James writes, "Consciousness…does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described" (239). Yet the "stream" figure is only presented as a contingent model, deployed in order to rethink consciousness as an intellectual and social problem. Supposing that the experience of consciousness is a unity marked by shifting fields of attention, rather than a "bundle of separate ideas" requiring assembly by an "Ego" as associationist psychology contended (277), James offers an image of the human consciousness defined by obscure, extremely personal, and for the most part unrepeatable thought experiences. James warns that our thoughts are far more fleeting and strange than we are habituated to thinking:

> What must be admitted is that the definite images of traditional psychology form but
>
> the smallest part of our minds as they actually live. The traditional psychology talks
>
> like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful,

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[15] I describe James' conception of consciousness as "abductory" because his method in this chapter—as well as his vision of consciousness itself—strongly resembles the form of logical inference known as "abduction" proposed by his friend and colleague Charles Sanders Peirce. James does not use the term itself, but as a method it resonates with much of "The Stream of Thought," and ultimately with Pragmatism. Basically a form of willed guessing, "abduction" or "retroduction" is the logical "operation of adopting an explanatory hypothesis" ("Abduction" 152). By proposing that consciousness is a stream, James merely concocts a useful, pre-hypothetical metaphor in order to work out how minds interact and fail to interact. The metaphor "stream of conscious" is limited; the method, which frees the philosophical mind to trust not simply its institution but also its impulse to guess, is less so.

quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and

the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would

continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists

resolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free

water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the

dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. (255)

Against the tendency of psychology to identify "definite images" of conscious experience—a

tendency ironically repeated, it should be noted, by those who now repeat the metaphor "stream of

consciousness" to describe a shifting psychological state—James suggests that our thoughts are

hardly defined, and represent ephemeral conditions in the current of an unstoppable stream. The

ability to have a coherent thought thus depends less upon the nature of its specific "content," and

more upon factors such as attention, mood, and fatigue: "When very fresh, our minds carry an

immense horizon with them…Under ordinary conditions the halo of felt relations is much more

circumscribed. And in states of extreme brain-fag the horizon is narrowed almost to the passing

word" (256). (In fact, James argues, the very idea that a thought must have content or an "object" is

a "perfectly wanton assumption" (274), part of what he calls the "psychologist's fallacy" (197); for

him, "*thought may, but need not, in knowing, discriminate between its object and itself*" (275, italics original).)

This is because a thought is irretrievable, and contingent upon all the physical and mental

circumstances bearing on the moment of its occurrence. Even when a thought occurs in the

medium of language, James imagines, "if we wish to *feel* that idiosyncrasy we must reproduce the

thought as it was uttered, with every word fringed and the whole sentence bathed in that original

halo of obscure relations, which, like an horizon, then spread about its meaning" (276, italics

original). Even then "we may err as much by excess as by defect" (276), although it remains "[o]ur

psychological duty…to cling as closely as possible to the actual constitution of the thought we are

studying" (276), in order to move beyond it; in order to communicate and reach a reasoned

consensus.

A particular thought is a particular thought, no more, no less. The experience cannot be

repeated, and the capacity of language to transmit a thought is limited. A particular thought is

moreover *not necessarily deliberate*, because it is no more than a concordance of transitory conditions in

a broad, uncontrollable stream. This does not mean humans are incapable of clarity or intelligible

insight, only that the processes by which clarity is achieved are more obscure, more determined by

mood and mental freshness—by the impulses of the will—and more plural than we might suppose

retrospectively, picking our way back against the inertia of a clear outcome. James illustrates this

with the following diagram and explanation, which he might have plucked from *Tristram Shandy*:
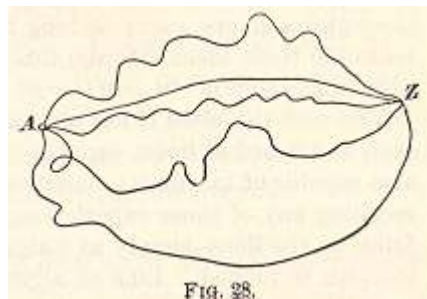
Fig. 1. "Fig. 28" from "*The Principles of Psychology.*" Volume I. (269)

The means by which a particular "thinker" gets from point A ("some experience from which a

number of thinkers start") to point Z ("the practical conclusion rationally inferrible from it") are

according to James extraordinarily varied:

> One gets to the conclusion by one line, another by another; one follows a course of
>
> English, another of German, verbal imagery. With one visual images predominate;
>
> with another, tactile. Some trains are tinged with emotions, others not; some are very
>
> abridged, synthetic and rapid, others, hesitating and broken into many steps. But
>
> when the penultimate terms of all the trains, however differing *inter se*, finally shoot

into the same conclusion, we say and rightly say, that all the thinkers have had

substantially the same thought. It would probably astound each of them beyond

measure to be let into his neighbor's mind and to find how different the scenery

there was from that in his own. (269-270)

In this 1890 prototype for Howard Gardner's influential 1983 theory of multiple intelligences,[16]

James outlines a diverse array of inner experience. Yet the possibility of intellectual consensus,

notably, does not depend on tracking the specific nuances of this diversity. Rather, amid these

respective thought experiences, "[t]he only images *intrinsically* important are the halting-places, the

substantive conclusions, provisional or final, of the thought" (269, italics original). For James,

originator of the concept "stream of consciousness," the utility of the concept lay not in mental

pluralism itself, which is something James wholly presupposed, but in the possibility of a consensus

of reality built from complete, idiosyncratically attended thoughts. As a chapter, "The Stream of

Thought" hardly argues *for* the conception of human thinking as a stream, but rather offers a theory

of mental pluralism as a way of understanding how consensus can be reached by radically differing

thought processes.

That a version of this chapter's title would eventually become the most widely-used literary

euphemism for free-flowing psychological realism is a historical irony. James never sought to

promote the "stream of consciousness" as a literal model for understanding human thought

patterns. On the contrary, the metaphor of the "stream" is but one expression of his basic

methodological assumption: that the vast majority of our thought processes are impulsive, barely

knowable even to ourselves, exceptionally diverse ("the greatest breach in nature"), and yet still

surmountable, with considerable luck and labor, through means such as "attention" and an

acceptance of the necessity of confronting the mind's "unwelcome object." Like all action, including

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[16] See Gardner, Howard. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences.* 1983. New York: Basic Books, 2004.

unconscious "ideo-motor action," writing is *always* subsequent to the will. The idea of a "stream-of-consciousness" work of literature would have been preposterous for James; antithetical. In fact he makes this point himself in "The Stream of Thought" chapter, citing several examples (including "the obscurer passages of Hegel") of how "sentences" and even books "with absolutely no meaning may be uttered in good faith and pass unchallenged" (263). One of these examples is *Substantialism: or Philosophy of Knowledge*, an 1879 quasi-philosophical work by one Jean Story, from which James extracts a cryptic excerpt.[17] Here is his explanation of Story's gesture:

> There are every year works published whose contents show them to be by real lunatics. To the reader, the book quoted from seems pure nonsense from beginning to end. It is impossible to divine, in such a case, just what sort of feeling of rational relation between the words may have appeared to the author's mind. *The border line between objective sense and nonsense is hard to draw; that between subjective sense and nonsense, impossible.* Subjectively, any collocation of words may make sense—even the wildest words in a dream—if one only does not doubt their belonging together…Yet there seems no reason to doubt that the subjective feeling of the rationality of these sentences was strong in the writer as he penned them, or even that some readers by straining may have reproduced it in themselves. (264, italics mine)

James does not cite Story as a "real lunatic" in the pejorative sense; rather, he does so to heighten the drama of his point, which depends upon the fact that a lunatic's writing may appear nonsensical to the outside viewer even though it may have made complete sense to its author. Story's book is not a novel, but for James there could be *no such thing* as a stable, "subjective" psychological novel—

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[17] Here is the excerpt: "The flow of the efferent fluids of all these vessels from their outlets at the terminal loop of each culminate link on the surface of the nuclear organism is continuous as their respective atmospheric fruitage up to the altitudinal limit of their expansibility, whence, when atmosphered by like but coalescing essences from higher altitudes,—those sensibly expressed as the essential qualities of external forms,—they descend, and become assimilated by the afferents of the nuclear organism" (qtd. in James 263).

or any psychological book, for that matter—because psychological experience *culminates* in the will: its "whole drama is a metal drama." If there were nothing but subjective experience, then the line "between sense and nonsense" would not exist; if a novel were truly psychological, it would make no sense. With a plurality of consciousnesses, however, albeit separated by "the greatest breach in nature," there are objective standards for what makes sense and what doesn't. The line is "hard to draw," but the possibility of recognizing sense—measurable by the ability of readers to "reproduce" a way of thinking "in themselves"—indicates that we are already dealing with a post-psychological, social artifact.

In this aspect of the "stream of consciousness" theory—the portion of the theory dealing not with the misappropriated figure itself, but with the problem of how to communicate the conditions of the stream (of which the metaphor of the stream is an example)—James offers a distinction essential to our understanding of writer's block. Not coincidentally, this leads to the earlier site where James eventually uses the literal term "block." Imagining a specific thought experience, one among a plurality of possible experiences between instantiating event "A" and conclusion "Z" represented in Figure 1 above, James admits, "At certain moments [a thinker] may find himself doubting whether his thoughts have not come to a full stop; but the vague sense of a *plus ultra* makes him ever struggle on towards a more definite expression of what it may be; whilst the slowness of his utterance shows how difficult, under such conditions, the labor of thinking must be" (256). Yet the sense that one has encountered a "full stop" is also an illusion, not just because one still feels the impulse to follow a "*plus ultra*," but because of a confusion of *the action* of one's thought for *its content,* which for James could never be separate. James:

> The awareness that our *definite* thought has come to a stop is an entirely different
> thing from the awareness that our thought is definitively completed. The expression
> of the latter state of mind is the falling inflection which betokens that the sentence is

ended, and silence. The expression of the former state is 'hemming and hawing,' or else such phrases as '*et cetera*,' or '*and so forth*.' But notice that every part of the sentence to be left incomplete feels differently as it passes, by reason of the premonition we have that we shall be unable to end it. The 'and so forth' casts its shadow back, and is as integral a part of the object of the thought as the distinctest of images would be. (256, italics original)

The incomplete thought is, significantly, still a thought, however inflected in terms of content by its incompleteness. As it was in the chapter on the will, block is no more than a temporary condition of the intellect amid the "stream of thought," "dyed in the free water that flows round it," and subject to shifts of mood, attention, and effort. What matters is that the "awareness that our *definite* thought has come a stop" is also an idea, which reflects and interacts with the larger, incomplete thought of which it is also a part. The incomplete thought itself and one's awareness of being unable to complete it are continuous, and the conflict between them mainly our perception.

In this context, explaining how a thought relates to its completion amid the stream of consciousness—the exceedingly complex, ever shifting medium in which individual, directed thoughts occur—James makes what is actually his first literal deployment of the notion of "block" in this sense. A pragmatic, isolated dictional choice can only imply so much about James's philosophy at large, but in this case the implications are uncanny. In any successful "brain-tract or process," there are three parts: a rising current, an "apex," and a falling off. James represents this visually with a symmetrical bell curve, where the x-axis marks the passage of time and the y-axis the intensity of a given process. Consider the example task of reciting the first seven letters of the alphabet: "If I recite *a,b,c,d,e,f,g*, at the moment of uttering *d*, neither *a,b,c* nor *e,f,g*, are out of my consciousness altogether, but both, after their respective fashions 'mix their dim lights' with the stronger one of the *d*, because their neuroses are both awake in some degree" (257). Successful thoughts proceed in a

chain of intensities, and when successful proceed like a wave, where a particular disturbance has a

leading surge and a wake, both of which share in the wave's transmission of energy but cannot be

confused for its crest. This can sometimes fail, however, a process James illustrates by citing a

phenomenon described by William Benjamin Carpenter in *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874):

> There is a common class of mistakes which shows how brain-processes begin to be
>
> excited before the thoughts attached to them are *due*—due, that is, in substantive and
>
> vivid form. I mean those mistakes of speech or writing by which, in Dr. Carpenter's
>
> words, "we mispronounce or misspell a word, by introducing into it a letter or
>
> syllable of some other, whose turn is shortly to come; or it may be, the whole of the
>
> anticipated word is substituted for the one which ought to have been expressed." In
>
> these cases one of two things must have happened: either some local accident of
>
> nutrition *blocks* the process that is *due*, so that other processes discharge that ought as
>
> yet to be but nascently aroused; or some opposite local accident *furthers* the *latter*
>
> *processes* and makes them explode before their time. (258, italics original)

Notice how these "mistakes" of verbal expression are presumed a matter of an incorrect thought

sequence rather than of mental or physiological disorder. While the circumstance of whatever

"*blocks*" a thought's completion or makes thought processes "explode before their time" are

assuredly complex and specific to each instance, James considers them to be determined by "local

accident of nutrition" rather than general, disordered tendencies. As it was in the discussion of the

will, here too the experience of block is continuous with the experience of completing a thought.

For James, block is the mind's experience of an incomplete thought, and part of the content of the

thought. The blocked thinker's responsibility thus becomes a matter of taking seriously the

"overtones" of a given thought, which "are not separately heard by the ear; they blend with the

fundamental note, and suffuse it, and alter it; and even so do the waxing and waning brain processes

at every moment blend with and suffuse and alter the psychic effect of the processes which are at their culminating point" (258). Again, even in the context of a basic, verbal thought experience, the processes of block and the experience of cognitive "culminat[ion]" lie in close proximity rather than in opposition.

Where cognitive accident is an essential component of successful cognition, which can render "sense" rather than "nonsense," writer's block becomes no more than a type of verbal block specific to writers. This does not, however, necessarily advocate a literary aesthetic embracing subjective cognitive accident as a matter of course, let alone as a generic convention. James readily admits that the subjective distinction between "sense" and "nonsense" is "impossible" to render, and the "objective" distinction very hard to draw. Yet his acceptance of a plurality of thought ultimately serves the possibility of *sense* in general, of interpersonal communication and consensus, of bridging the "greatest breach in nature" between individual minds. When Sinclair redeployed the term "stream of consciousness" to describe Richardson's novels, she did so in order to suggest that their perceived "formlessness" was really a simulation of this logic and should be objectively reconsidered as formal unity (although, according to Gillespie, she would ultimately retreat from this idea). Yet James presented the "stream of consciousness" as but one metaphor for describing the subjective continuity between cognitive difficulty and sense, and—not insignificantly—a broadly intelligible one. While he clearly makes room for the possibility of objective sense, and while Richardson's novels may possess considerable objective sense for her admiring readers (including, obviously, May Sinclair), Sinclair's use of James's term to describe a kind of literary text—and that the term should have become the functional name for a class of modernist fiction—mistakes a normal, subjective process for the miracle of objective sense.

James wrote, "The border line between objective sense and nonsense is hard to draw; that between subjective sense and nonsense, impossible." His metaphor "stream of consciousness"

serves this maxim, which outlines not the specific figures through which he makes his argument but the methodological assumptions of his theory. The metaphor can only be accurately understood in the maxim's terms, like this: the patterns of the subjective "stream of consciousness" are hard to draw; and an objectively observable "stream of consciousness" does not exist. Whatever objective sense we have arrives not by embracing the authority of the individual "stream of consciousness" as a new, open, flexible genre, but in appreciating the plurality of mental experience without abandoning the assumption that objective sense is only barley possible in the first place. For this reason, psychological realism, strictly defined, cannot exist (although the sense of a literary text remains a highly subjective experience for the individual reader, and an entirely subjective experience for the individual writer, whose cognitive blocks and resolutions are nevertheless all natural processes). Insofar as James was correct, the idea of "writer's block" as a psychological disorder is an extreme expression of this misunderstanding in which the limits of both objectivity and subjectivity may be precariously ignored. Block is normal and a part of successful thinking, although like any complex, "local accident of nutrition" the logic of how it relates to a specified complete thought is very difficult to work out, and largely concealed from retrospective inquiry when it becomes a successful, objective expression of sense.

Obviously *Principles* and its theories are bound in their time and place. Released at a time when American literature possessed only a limited conception of itself, and just a year before congressional reforms to copyright law would allow American authors to compete financially with international authors,[18] James imagined that three intellectual and social elites—himself, his brother, and Howells—would be the ones to forge the "epocal" year in American literature. That he was

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[18] Until March 1891, American publishers were not required to honor international copyrights, allowing publishers to circulate foreign works—including works by writers who were very popular in nineteenth-century America such as Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens—for a much greater profit than books by American authors. For a discussion of the impact of this on subsequent American conceptions of authorship, see Weber (4-6), as well as my remarks on Weber in Part One, Section III (46-55).

wrong, in the long run, is something for which anyone who values mental pluralism should ultimately be grateful; James himself would likely have been grateful for it had he known the societal transformations that would mark the twentieth century. The publication of *Principles* in 1890 came nevertheless at a kairotic moment in American letters, when psychology remained a branch of philosophy and a work of philosophy could be presented as literature. Like modernism, James's philosophy pursued complexity over simplicity. A quarter of a century before the outbreak of WWI, with its significant disillusioning and fragmenting effects on Western conceptions of the real, James admitted he could barely begin to know how he could get up on a cold morning, or move his arm, let alone write a 1400-page exposition on psychology. He pursued objective sense nevertheless as a rare, valuable possibility, and argued that mental attention in the direction of "greatest resistance"—in the direction of block itself—was moral action.

Novels, including works believed to possess a special capacity to convey psychological intimacy, have the potential to follow this proscription. Insofar as they are all literary works subsequent to the impulsive Jamesian will, and the products of "higher thought" where "the blocking and its release" is a common feature, it might be said they inevitably follow this proscription. Even a novel that does not account for the means of its production was somehow produced; even the most cryptic, nonsensical "stream-of-conscious" text was the product of a certain amount of intellectual will, and coherence. The problem with works of psychological realism, which I pursue at length in section IV, has but little to do with their status as specific, individual expressions, which are frequently very accomplished and moreover "moral" in the Jamesian sense insofar as they confront and in some cases heroically transcend "unwelcome objects." Rather, the genre as a whole depends upon a literary contract between author and reader that too readily presumes the psychological intimacy of the writing process, significantly overestimating literature's capacity to represent the inner-workings of the mind and thus bridge the gap between human minds.

43

Literature's capacity to cross this breach is only marginal, perhaps no better than any other willed, interpersonal act

The utility of examining James's theory retrospectively derives from the fact he wrote at very nearly the last moment before psychology would come to dominate literary realism, before psychological realism would come to flourish in the context of modernism. For this reason, I present the arguments regarding consciousness and block in *Principles* as a vision of literary production where an act of writing does not differ fundamentally from any other act of the will, which is the *endpoint* of psychology. As a means of reconsidering the inertia of a century privileging psychology's role in literature, the possibility that psychological realism (and perhaps "psychology" itself) is a historical rather than epistemological classification is worth entertaining. However delusional, the possibility of psychological realism has been an important aspect of the novel's formal evolution, especially as it helped promote the democratization of the canon. But the psychological novel is ultimately an impression rather than a stable genre. Except in local instances, upon which we focus with extreme concentration and with considerable good function, the logic of the "stream of consciousness" as James defined it is inaccessible even to ourselves; the possibility of a "stream of consciousness" novel, which can simulate or communicate consciousness, is no more than a thematic possibility. But the implications of knowing this fundamental rhetorical limit—perhaps a little like recognizing the speed of light as a cosmic speed limit—can be exceptionally beneficial to a critical understanding of the novel form. Where psychological realism is assumed to be impossible, all successful novelistic communication becomes implicitly moral and public. Where there is no such thing as psychological realism, there is no need for writer's block, only the problem of confronting unwelcome moral difficulty.

III. Method: No Secret Miracles

Most of the remainder of Book One shows through specific examples how psychological realism opened the space for the myth of block to flourish, and begins to trace the shape of one alternate, possible mode of realism in American fiction, *moral realism*. But I want to pause to confront how writer's block has been addressed in the handful of serious critical studies addressing the topic, if mainly to show how even exacting critical standards can break down in the face of the cultural myth, and to provide a context for the methodology of the present study. Aside from Bergler's early account, which is a highly problematic example of the myth and one of its major catalysts, and Rose's cognitive study, which offers a concise, useful pedagogical definition of writer's block but has limited application to the project of addressing block as myth, there are at present three major works on writer's block: Zachary Leader, *Writer's Block* (1991), Alice W. Flaherty, *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer's Block, and the Creative Brain* (2004), and Myles Weber, *Consuming Silences: How We Read Authors Who Don't Publish* (2005). Taken as a group, by far the most striking feature of these studies is their diversity. An exploratory literary history, a neuroscientific investigation and memoir, and a strict materialist reading of American literary production and consumption: to encounter them together is to witness the remarkable adaptability of the myth of block firsthand. While all of these studies offer useful discoveries about the writers and conditions they discuss, none of them avoids falling into the trap of the myth to some degree. Since these studies do not constitute a critical conversation and do not refer to one another (except insofar as Leader briefly mentions and dismisses Rose (16-18), and Flaherty alludes to the prior work of Leader and Rose as other approaches to block (88-9)), let us begin with Weber's study, which is the closest to the present study in its domain because it deals primarily with debunking a twentieth-century American literary problem. Moving backwards chronologically, let us then address Flaherty's neuroscientific approach to literary creativity, and Leader's broad historical account of writer's block.

Although all of these studies provide valuable information and thought-provoking claims, I present them mainly as cautionary tales. At the end of this section, however, I examine a fourth text as an alternate theory of literary creativity, the Jorge Luis Borges story "The Secret Miracle." Although Borges is mainly considered a writer of fiction, his clever metacritical satire offers a powerful critique of postmodern critical epistemologies with broad implications for how we think about block in an American context. Although the setting of Borges's story is Prague during the Holocaust, it presents a world where psychological realism is, like our own, both dominant and irrational. Where psychological realism is presupposed to be literature's primary aim, Borges jokes, writing might as well take place solipsitically on the stage of the mind: a possibility that illustrates well how psychological realism and block logically relate and reinforce one another.

Consuming Silences

Among existing critical studies relating to block, Weber's *Consuming Silences* will seem at first glance the most rigorous and skeptical. Notably, it doesn't use the term "block" but rather "silence" as its analytic domain. Limiting his scope to four American writers "who don't publish"—Tillie Olsen, Henry Roth, J.D. Salinger, and Ralph Ellison—Weber addresses the "commodification" of silence, examining how silence can be presented to a reading public as a kind of "text": "In twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century America, unproductive writers have been able to command serious critical attention and remain literary celebrities by offering the public volumes of silence, which have been read and interpreted like any other text" (1). According to Weber, by publishing excerpts, excuses, and, through editors and executors, posthumous manuscripts—by promising book-length works and releasing fragments supposedly from them—writers have sustained careers.

This strict materialist examination of the "linked transactions of producing and consuming silence" is highly provocative (9). One of its most compelling aspects is the account Weber offers of

the development of the author function in the US as a result of the significant 1891 reforms of

American copyright law. As it is well known, by mandating international copyright reciprocity the

US Congress made it easier for American authors to compete with British writers for publication

opportunities in the United States. Because American publishers didn't have to pay royalties for

works by international authors such as Sir Walter Scott or Charles Dickens before the reforms,

profit margins for publishers releasing works by foreign authors far exceeded those by domestic

authors (4-5). These reforms, combined with "concurrent technological advances in both printing

and transportation," led not only to the rise of proprietary American authorship, but, according to

Weber, made possible new, homegrown literary potential: "Initials at the end of an author or a story

were replaced with full bylines of commissioned American authors—Stephen Crane, Jack London,

Frank Norris—whose muscular, naturalistic prose brought to an end the dominance of what

[Christopher P.] Wilson called 'the ideas and foreign manners of aristocratic societies'" (5). While the

year 1891 does not strictly mark "the inception of authorship, or even professional authorship, in

the United States" for Weber,[19] it nevertheless rectified a scenario where "the professional American

author was legally handicapped" and American literature could not adequately develop (6). For

Weber, subsequent "fully copyrighted and commercially promoted authors" would "differ in kind

from their predecessors" (6), inaugurating a paradigm that would eventually come to be defined by

"the rise of the copyrighted author and the exploding popularity of literary biography" (9). Although

Weber never offers a complete explanation for why American literary consumerism should differ in

intensity, why "silence" can be packaged and sold in the US in ways in cannot elsewhere, he implies

that the relatively late arrival of the "fully copyrighted" author in the US delayed the arrival of a

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[19] Citing William Charvet, Weber acknowledges that there were some professional American writers before 1891, including Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper (oddly, he doesn't mention Nathaniel Hawthorne or Mark Twain)

diverse body of American writing until modern commercial structures and mass dissemination technologies were already in place.

When it comes to his specific readings of the concerns of the authors he addresses, Weber is frequently convincing. Providing meticulous accounts of the publication histories and receptions of the writers he discusses, Weber shows how publishers, editors, and writers themselves have released works of arguable merit to eager and often disappointed readerships, which can nevertheless elevate an author's reputation. Throughout the volume, however, one is frequently struck by the pitch of Weber's rhetoric as a debunker of individual literary reputations. Part of the reason for this discomfort emerges from the fact that all of the writers he addresses—with the partial exception of Salinger—emerged from poverty and represent historically marginalized groups.[20] Their literary careers, even if partially bogus, constitute accomplishments made after remarkably difficult original circumstances. For instance, notice the precarious imperative Weber offers against being duped by the career and reception of fiction writer and feminist intellectual Tillie Olsen. In Weber's perception, Olsen, who only published four complete short stories during her lifetime, exploited her Foucauldian "author function" to promote a writing career that did not really take place. Olsen has been embraced by feminist critics eager to take her as "the representative silenced female author" (11), Weber claims, creating a situation where it is possible to question whether she is finally "an opportunist or a victim" (42). Her career thus constitutes a troubling critical problem for Weber: "Olsen's one book of completed fiction, the 115-page *Tell Me a Riddle* [1966], established her career as a writer; the absence of work since, far from harming her career, has sustained it, nourished it, *become* it" (21, italics original). This process was catalyzed and laid bare by what is probably Olsen's

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[20] Although the young Salinger was half-Jewish at a time when anti-Semitism was far more rampant in the US—his father was the son of a sometime rabbi of Lithuanian extraction, while his mother was born in Iowa and was of Scottish, German and Irish descent—he grew up in relative comfort compared to the other authors I address in this study. Tillie Olsen's parents were Russian immigrants and labor activists in the Midwest. Henry Roth's parents were Jewish immigrants from Galicia who brought Roth to the US when he was a baby; Roth subsequently grew up in the tenements of New York's Lower East Side. Ralph Ellison was raised in segregated Oklahoma City, mostly by a single mother.

most famous book, the 1978 volume *Silences*, a peculiar montage of essays, quotations, statistics, and anecdotes on what it means to be a silenced writer, many of which are extracted from the work of other authors. Obviously not every reader has been deceived by Olsen in Weber's terms, and Weber is careful to temper his argument by citing an array of prominent female skeptics including Doris Grumbach, Margaret Atwood, and Joyce Carol Oates. But the risks of misunderstanding Olsen are high according to Weber given the amount of attention that has already been paid to her: "Olsen, who has published a total of four completed works of short fiction, is the subject of more than a dozen scholarly monographs and other book-length studies and the object of intense sympathy and adulation" (37). To those who would seek to understand Olsen, whose career, in Weber's perspective, represents an exploitation of the literary marketplace and a kind of scam that has been embraced by a receptive feminist critical establishment, Weber thus proscribes the following formula for critical sobriety:

> One can appreciate the emotional rewards gained by producing scholarship that venerates a grateful elderly woman. But it is every scholar's obligation to approach all authors, male or female, young or old, in a manner suitable for serious academic inquiry, and to read all varieties of texts, even deliberate silence—*especially* deliberate silence—with a clear eye and a willingness to hold the artist to minimum standards of coherence, plausibility, and basic logic. (44, italics original)

It may be possible to relate to the basic impulse of Weber's resistance. What Weber advocates, it would seem, is a consensus of what constitutes integrity among practitioners of intellectual history. Yet Weber's impulse to single out Olsen's very limited career as an opportunistic con—on her own part and on the part of feminist critics—is actually part of a general antagonism toward the writers he treats in his study, and moreover against the readers and critics who accept their deceptions. This becomes clear in Weber's assessment of Ralph Ellison. In his introduction,

Weber abstracts his perspective on Ralph Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* writings in *Consuming Silences'* introduction like this:

> after delivering a masterpiece in *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison was unable to complete a second novel. All subsequent texts issued during Ellison's lifetime—essays, essay collections, interviews, short stories, novel excerpts—served as paratext to the one great book. The author's stopgap texts—his articulated 'silence'—continue to provide a threshold to his masterpiece and comment on its missing successor. Unable to deliver a second book of fiction, Ellison constructed instead a complicated paratextual apparatus to guide his novel's subsequent reception. (12)

Here, Weber claims that he has found a way of addressing the "complicated" set of extra-novelistic materials Ellison released in volumes such as *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory* as "a threshold" to his fiction. This is an intriguing prospect for anyone who has puzzled over the collections, which can seem to demonstrate Ellison as an adaptable, accomplished artist of language, critic, and theorist of American literature while calling attention to the possible disappointment that Ellison never completed and published a second novel in his lifetime. Yet in the conclusions at the end of Weber's chapter it becomes clear that "paratextual apparatus," an adaptation of Gerard Genette's notion of "paratext" and by all accounts an interesting way of thinking about Ellison's nonfictional writings, is actually code for a relative failure, where the unambiguous standard for Ellison's success is the never-achieved publication of the second novel on which he was at work until his death. Here is Weber's final summary of Ellison's career:

> Miraculously, he had succeeded once at this Herculean task [writing a novel]. The second major attempt was taking longer than expected and, God forbid, might ultimately run aground.

But why did the author give so many interviews and devote precious time to minor essays? To explain his masterpiece [*Invisible Man*] and, particularly at a time when the author's reputation was being assaulted by fellow black writers, to clarify what a singular accomplishment the novel is. Considering the troubles he had shaping his fiction after 1952, Ellison did well to salvage an impressive reputation. And no doubt he died confident that his legacy would remain intact. (130)

Voicing his conception of Ellison's authorial anxiety, Weber dismisses Ellison's "minor essays" as a waste of "precious time" in comparison to the "Herculean" work he should have been up to: finishing and publishing a second novel. Whether or not the absence of a completed second Ellison novel from the American canon constitutes a cultural loss—and how could we ever imagine how the unwieldy logic of the canon would have treated such a work? how could Ellison have imagined it in advance?—Weber's portrayal of Ellison's attempt to "explain his masterpiece" through his essays is astonishingly negative. Ellison is also an important figure in the present study, and, as I show in Part Two, Section IV, essays such as "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" and "Society, Morality, and the Novel" explain *Invisible Man* very well indeed; they constitute remarkable literary accomplishments for that very reason. By waging his critique in this formulation, Weber dubiously privileges *Invisible Man*, a novel with a famously open, experimental format, as a monolithic literary achievement looming over whatever accomplishment the essays constitute, which to Weber are not just written in a different genre but are extra-literary, "epitextual" publications (121).

Weber is correct to point out that Ellison's essays "explain" *Invisible Man*. But to portray this as a liability is to participate in a very limited conception of what constitutes literature and for that matter American literary authorship. It is akin to claiming Henry James's prefaces undermine his novels, or that critic-novelists such as Toni Morrison or John Barth should not have also written criticism if it happens to explain their fiction, or that *The Scarlet Letter* only begins after Hawthorne's

mainly non-fictional "The Custom-House" introduction. That Ellison sought to explain himself to a literary community, to justify his work through collections of essays, degrades nothing about *Invisible Man* or his general reputation. What Weber misunderstands is how the essays *are* literary work. Whether published in opportunistic collections or considered individually, they demonstrate Ellison's willingness to participate in an increasingly hostile conversation about his own writing instead of, as Weber would have it, his dysfunctional defensiveness. In the end, and curiously in full view of the "complications inherent in doing so," Weber is far more interested in showing how Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* essays conform to Genette's categories of "later preface" and "delayed preface" than to examining them individually as achievements of rhetorical art (121-2). This is the line of argument where Weber makes his most problematic claims, which manifest in materialist reductions such as this one: "Like any paratext—a book cover, say, or a copyright page—Ellison's essay collections provide information: simple facts about the origins of the writing of *Invisible Man* and testimonies about the veracity and appropriateness of the fictional material as applied to a black narrator of Ellison's generation" (122). While Ellison's essays are *of course* fraught with historical complexities, and flaws, they are hardly as common as Weber suggests, and are rather worthy of debate and serious engagement. To put them on par with "a book cover, say, or a copyright page" insofar as they convey "simple facts" is to propose an exceptionally limiting, novel-obsessed critical methodology. Weber's reduction of Ellison's essays that go beyond autobiography to offer "testimonies" on the craft of fiction-writing moreover evades Ellison's meticulous arguments about the loss of the moral dimension in twentieth-century American writing in essays such as "Twentieth-Century Fiction" and "Society, Morality, and the Novel," which ironically promote the very sort of rhetorical reading Weber's method rejects.

Weber aspires to find an objective way of reevaluating a set of misunderstood writers. The full title of Weber's book, *Consuming Silences: How We Read Authors Who Don't Publish*, suggests the

volume will soberly examine a historical phenomenon, a culture where consumerism reigns and

author functions, once established, circulate like commodities, even if a writer has gone "silent." The

volume presents itself as impartial, and eminently savvy. In the jacket blurb on the back of the book,

which exactly reproduces some of the language from Weber's introduction, *Consuming Silences*

describes itself like this:

> Weber sees periods of nonpublication as texts that are consumed by the literary
>
> public—and sometimes produced deliberately by inactive writers and their handlers.
>
> However, his aim is not to criticize individual authors but to reveal connections
>
> between literature as a commodity and authorship as a profession. As Weber looks at
>
> the particular circumstances of each author's silence, he explores such topics as the
>
> cult of celebrity, intellectual property law, the complicity of the media and the
>
> academy in engendering and then maintaining an author's silence, and mass
>
> production and distribution. (Back Cover)

But in practice Weber's primary title might as well be the pun it not-too-carefully implies—the book

openly participates in the myth of *consuming* literary silences. The subtitle "*How We Read Authors Who*

Don't Publish," moreover, might as well be the bold, paradoxical agenda it surely would never openly

admit to being, for the work is ultimately antagonistic toward the writers Weber does not bother to

read as competent representatives of American culture, all of whom really *did* publish. In fact upon

closer examination, the paradoxicality of *Consuming Silences* as a rhetorical gesture is well represented

in the book's jacket material. Not only are the final two words of the subtitle presented under

erasure on the cover—they are struck through with lines, *How We Read Authors Who ~~Don't Publish~~*—

presenting that part of the title as the error it actually is (since obviously all of the writers included in

the volume really did publish; their release of "volumes of silence" is the basis of Weber's claim).

The gesture is revised and repeated on the book's title page, where the word "don't" appears entirely

capitalized: "How we read authors who DON'T publish." While it is unclear the exact role Weber would have had in devising these graphic renderings of his subtitle (although he ostensibly approved their final form), the rhetorical thrust of the revision reveals a strangely, confrontational method. Perhaps there is something inherently wrong in applying the methods of how we read authors who "DO" publish to this context of "silent" authors, but none of the authors Weber addresses are as silent has he supposes. Even a limit-case like Olsen's *Silences* possesses some cultural value, and reflects a literary achievement. It represents a semi-coherent organization of thoughts, which was intelligible and even moving for at least some of its readers, and, given its title, at least nominally aware of its own ironic status. As a published, promoted document, it also represents an astute, lucky negotiation of literary society, however opportunistic. The cultural inertia against the writing, publication, and especially the canonical recognition of any book is far too great for any literary achievement to be considered, at the end of the day, a con, or at least a coherent one.

Despite his commitment to objectivity, despite his overt reminder of "every scholar's obligation…to read all varieties of texts, even deliberate silence—*especially* deliberate silence—with a clear eye and a willingness to hold the artist to minimum standards of coherence, plausibility, and basic logic," Weber arbitrarily prioritizes the original novel or story collection as the standards of viable literary production. Because of this limiting assumption, even in his most aggressive attempts to debunk authors who duped the public and published silence, which the book denies are its actual aims, Weber actually serves the myth of readable silence—the myth of block—he ostensibly wishes to deconstruct, treating (and not reading) published and sometimes highly accomplished works as silence simply on the basis that they do not conform to generic standards. *Consuming Silences* would like to redeem those authors who don't misuse their author functions to con a capricious, commercialized system. In fact it slams doors to literary recognition by enforcing a very limited array of successful publications as legitimate literary activity, supposing that unconventional works, many

of which would be miracles by the standards of any aspiring, unpublished author, might as well *be* silence.

The Midnight Disease

Materialist rigor, in other words, does not necessarily insulate against the myth of block, which is a historical problem. What about science? Drawing on medical neuroscience, and yet seeking to offer a critical intervention in psychology, literature, literary criticism, and philosophy, Massachusetts General Hospital doctor and Harvard neuroscience professor Alice Flaherty's *The Midnight Disease* offers an innovative approach to the question of writer's block, ostensibly bridging the "two cultures" divide and when possible pursuing scientific answers to questions of human creativity. Yet Flaherty's study immediately gives the impression of simply remapping territory explored in literary and philosophical contexts with new, medical terminology, a quality Flaherty's account shares with Edmund Bergler's *The Writer and Psychoanalysis*. For instance, here is Flaherty's introductory summary of her most daring chapter, on writer's block as a neuroscientific "brain state":

> A neuroscientific, as opposed to a psychological, perspective on block (Chapter 4) allows biochemical explanations and treatments of block. In the frequent case of block related to mood swings, a medical model of block can clarify why writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who were made miserable by writer's block, were also able in bursts of creativity to write hypergraphically…The close relationship between productivity and mood is complex, as when mood disorders both spark and hinder the drive to write, or when alcohol abuse eases the anxiety of writer's block but decreases the ability to write well. (15)

Even if "biochemical explanations and treatments of block" were considered to be a desirable thing—in an educational setting such as those described by Rose, perhaps—Flaherty's impulse to retroactively explain Coleridge's career in terms of "mood swings" is mystifying, and *not* for the reason she supposes, that "the application of science and medicine to problems such as writing well disturbs people specifically *because* of the notion of testability, of cold human experimentation" (9, italics original). Regardless of whether or not Coleridge could have been aided by a medical treatment for his supposed block, his canonical status—the best evidence of which is the very fact that Flaherty would think to use him as a well-known example in her study—depends far more upon the specific content of his ideas, how they spoke to his time and place and how they speak to us now, than it does on retroactively diagnosing his mental state as a writer. Although Flaherty claims an awareness of the "distinct limitations" of the "medical model for fighting suffering," which is otherwise "immensely powerful" (6), she openly embraces constructing standards of normalcy under the guise of treating illness. Whereas she may claim to "care about disease as a scalpel with which to dissect health" (8), and to be "fascinated by hypergraphia and writer's block because of what they tell us about normal creativity" (9), the act of dwelling on writing disorders as such reifies cultural assumptions far more than it explains them.

Like William James—who, it should be noted, juxtaposes nicely with Flaherty, since they occupied similar posts at Harvard separated by a century's time, and whom Flaherty cites on several occasions—Flaherty has a distinct interest in the science of the will, in comparing the role of the will in higher thought to simple human action. At times, Flaherty's interests echo those of James uncannily in terms of their domain:

> Problems of motivation are not, of course, restricted to writers. Some of my patients have severe movement disorders and, despite the best intentions, from day to day their willpower is no longer enough to drive their limbs. Yet someone with, say,

Parkinson's disease who has spent months in a wheelchair will, if there is a fire, be able to leap from her chair and run. This confusing inconsistency often convinces family members that their mother or husband isn't ill, but simply isn't trying hard enough. Sometimes not even the patient wants to give up that belief. To admit that your will is sometimes ineffective is terrifying. (7)

For Flaherty, the will is a biochemical enigma to be solved. The assumptions of this approach might be compared to those of her forbearer as a scientist of the will, who advocated mental pluralism and sought to normalize the strangeness of the human will. For James, human action was by definition the result of the incontrovertible prevalence of an idea. Unless it were possible to prove empirically severe neuromuscular degeneration, which for James would *by definition* mark a physiological parameter for the will—like the difficulty of willing a sneeze to take place—the Parkinson's patient who leaps from her chair would be for James completely intelligible. Flaherty, by contrast, interprets the patient's action in the existing terms of an established pathology, which generates an exceptionally disabling reading of the situation, where the temperamental nature of the will is "terrifying." (The subsequent confusion experienced by family members, who had defined the patient as immobile, is, incidentally, an excellent allegory for the myth of block. Like supposed cases of writer's block, where writers who actually generate writing can still be read as "silent" (as they are in Weber's book), transcending the will's seemingly normal, atrophied state becomes a betrayal, an affront to one's pathological identity.)

Explaining the goals of her study, Flaherty writes that she would like to extend the medical assistance available to those with neurodegenerative disorders to creative writers. As a scientist of volition, she differs markedly from James, who objectives are philosophical rather than ultimately clinical. Obviously Harvard, medical science, and disciplinary boundaries have all shifted radically since 1890, but this does not neutralize the epistemological vertigo one experiences comparing

Flaherty's objectives to those of James, her professional predecessor of a century prior and the originator of the term she silently cites:

> In place of the will, what do I offer my Parkinsonian patients? Pills, of course, or permanently implanted electrodes in their brains to stimulate them to move. I began to wonder if similar medical treatments might help people with disorders of motivation not just in movement initiation abilities, but also in cognitive skills such as writing. Motor-cognitive tasks are not perfectly analogous. In simple movements, stronger motivation—the fire under the wheelchair—is generally better. But in complicated tasks, if the motivation is too strong, the adrenaline that usually helps movements can cause the performer to freeze…Because of my biology-based training, and because so many others have described the ways that therapy can help writing problems, I sometimes neglect therapy and other behavioral interventions in this book. Yet they are important, ultimately biological, treatments. They work, in the end, by altering one's brain chemistry and neuroanatomy. (7)

Hard scientific proof that adrenaline plays a complex role in human action assuredly exists, and therapy may well be "ultimately biological" in its effects. Yet it seems pragmatically unlikely that the complexity of a specific writing task and rhetorical situation, or other "complicated tasks" involving high-level intellectual performance, could be understood with enough precision, let alone while in process, to make beneficial biochemical intervention viable or even possible. Barring massive technological, economic, and cultural revolution, which presumably would involve the cheap, ready availability of neurological medicines and cosmetic brain surgeries—a world of the sort fantastically imagined in novels such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) or the popular film *The Matrix* (1999)—the neuroscientist is unlikely to become the muse for the blocked writer of the future.

(Somewhat more likely, one wagers, is the replacement of the blocked writer with artificial intelligence software that never blocks.)

Flaherty expresses some awareness of the rhetorical precariousness of her position: "As a doctor, I hope I do not simply see normal problems as illness; I want also to see that illness is often nearly normal. If we are all a little bit sick, it is not all that sick to be sick…It is easy to forget that whether a behavior is a disease or a gift may depend on its context. The fallow periods that some writers call block are, for others, a fermentation stage" (7). In the end, however, Flaherty's pathologizing impulse prevails, and ultimately reveals itself to be scandalously unscientific in its treatment of literary history. In fact pathology trumps critical philosophy even in plain sight of James's alternative epistemology of volition, which she cites even though she does not recognize James as block's original theorist. Recounting a "famous story about William James," Flaherty presents James's discovery "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will," which became the opening move of the lecture "The Will to Believe," as a transcendence of a six-month period during which he was "tortured by indecision" (Flaherty 110). She then compares this experience to a moment James relates in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a famous passage where James recalls thinking of a patient with epilepsy from "the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches…like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human" (*Varieties* 179). Imagining himself as a member of a species where such paralysis is possible filled James with dread, and a sense of "fate" rather than will (179). To explain this, Flaherty supposes James had radical changes of "neurochemical state":

> In this mood James's belief in his free will vanished. Perhaps rather than hoping that
> we can invoke free will to solve our procrastination or bad temper, we should realize
> that when we are healthy enough to have a vigorous sense of free will, our problem

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has to a large extent already been solved. There are many ways of sidestepping a

feeble or recalcitrant will that do not involve medical treatment. Nonetheless, James

himself was not hesitant to compare his mental condition to the biological problem

of epilepsy. He combined exceptional literary and introspective ability with an

openness to the neuroscientific advancements of his day in a way paralleled by few

other writers. (110-111)

Flaherty's citation of James's willingness to compare "his mental condition to the biological problem

of epilepsy" as an admirable "openness to…neuroscientific advancements" may be correct except

for its anachronistic reference to neuroscience as a discipline. As we have seen, the continuum of

diverse mental experiences was a key aspect of James's philosophy. Yet there is a more pressing,

literary historical problem to contend with here. Although *Varieties* was published in 1902, and based

on the Gifford Lectures James prepared between 1899 and 1901 and delivered in Edinburgh, the

passage Flaherty cites from *Varieties* actually refers to an experience James had when he was twenty-

eight years old, long before he developed his theory on the "Will" in *Principles*, which earned him his

prominence as a philosopher (Richardson 117), let alone his salient remark on free-will in *The Will to

Believe* (1897). Flaherty's point thus not only reads James's remarks far too literally, and out of

context, but as proof of James's *own* volitional instability at a stage when he had only begun to work

out his theories, in 1870, only a year after he finished medical school and before his first

appointment at Harvard. Although James's frequently introspective methods invite an certain level

of speculation on his own mental states, Flaherty moves far too quickly from James theory—which

resembles her own project not just thematically but generically, as a hybrid work of literary

philosophy written by someone trained in medical science—to his own neurological state. Flaherty

reads James's published works as if he they were expressions by a troubled subject in a mental ward,

and not successful, influential works of philosophical literature. In fact, the entire James family is a

study in interaction of mental illness and creativity. As Flaherty claims elsewhere in *The Midnight Disease*, "[t]he James siblings—mildly bipolar philosopher William James, unipolar depressive novelist Henry James, career neurasthenic and bipolar Alice James, and severely bipolar Robert James—are an excellent example of how both manic-depression and writing can run in a family, with the mildly affected members being more productive that their most ill relatives and also than the general population" (65).

Whereas Weber's approach to block risks reducing unconventional literary productions to "simple facts," *The Midnight Disease*, a work building on science and seeking to explain new scientific discoveries to a much larger interdisciplinary audience, ironically falls into the opposite tendency: throughout the volume, Flaherty presents an unscientific, thoroughly romantic vision of the implicit dignity in the act of "writing" (her opening move: "Writing is one of the supreme human achievements. No, why should I be reasonable? Writing is *the* supreme achievement" (1)). Yet the status of writing in the sciences becomes a question Flaherty poses for herself:

> Why, if I am a scientist, have I written a book? Scientists should write scientific papers. A melancholy fact is that in the sciences, the book has become as marginal a literary form as the sestina or the villanelle. With the rise of the Internet, books may soon be obsolete even for general readers. (I should confess that often while writing this work, I would check a reference on the Internet rather than stand up and walk to the bookshelf five feet away.) Perhaps writing this book is my eulogy for the book, or a wistful hope that people will always be crazy enough to write books. (10)

Flaherty's "melancholy" lamentations about the general decline of "the book" amid the proliferation of new media are mainly alarmist, and the question they answer—"Why, if I am a scientist, have a written a book?"—is revealing. In fact the rigid line between the sciences and the humanities Flaherty imagines herself bridging hardly exists, at least from the perspective of the humanities.

Some of the most innovative literary and cultural theorists at work in recent decades—to name but three: N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway, and Priscilla Wald—hold science as well as humanities degrees, and critical movements such as new media studies, systems theory, ecocriticism, as well as general theoretical interests among literary critics since the 1960s in semiotics and linguistics all possess rigorous scientific dimensions. Yet as an expression of a personal anxiety regarding cultural standards, it explains a great deal about the failure of this book. Comparing Weber and Flaherty side-by-side, in fact, Weber looks much more like the scientist, obsessed with "cold, hard" empirical data, and Flaherty the possessor of a romantic vision of words and expression and less concerned with the verity of her text.

Yet perhaps the problem of evaluating Flaherty is also a matter of understanding genre I have already proposed is at the core of writer's block, a byproduct of psychological realism's dominance since the beginning of the twentieth century. Outside the usually collaborative genre of the science article, and of her "first book, a handbook of neurology" (11), Flaherty is not sure whether it is even appropriate to be scientific, leaving *The Midnight Disease* a decidedly unserious new approach to literary creativity. As an extreme example of how disciplinary boundaries shape literary production itself, however, the book remains an interesting artifact. Not insignificantly, the project emerged from a very real experience of pain which Flaherty sought to express through writing: shortly before beginning the book, she gave birth prematurely to two twin boys, both of whom soon died. Here is Flaherty's account of that moment of genesis, which she describes as an experience of "hypergraphia" or compulsive writing:

> For ten days I was filled with sorrow. Then suddenly, as if someone had thrown a switch, I was wildly agitated, full of ideas, all of them pressing to be written down. The world was flooded with meaning. I believed I had unique access to the secrets of

the Kingdom of Sorrow, about which I had an obligation to enlighten my—very

tolerant—friends and colleagues through essays and letters.

While postpartum major depression occurs after one in ten deliveries, post

partum mania occurs after one in a thousand…As I found out, one manic feature is

hypergraphia. (11)

Obviously the neurological phenomenon "postpartum major depression" is a real, documented

condition, the negative effects of which can be better controlled with medical diagnosis and, if

necessary, pharmacological treatment. Yet Flaherty's impulse to describe her own most prolific

moment as a writer as pathological, physiologically determined "hypergraphia"—"my writing *felt* like

a disease: I could not stop, and it sucked me away from family and friends" (11)—does little to

explain for the philosophical or rhetorical meaning of *The Midnight Disease.* In fact Flaherty's

treatment of her own writing experience in these terms becomes so abstract that it takes several

paragraphs before one realizes that Flaherty may actually be describing the production of *The

Midnight Disease* itself, rather than the aimless journaling or free-writing a condition like

"hypergraphia" implies. Although Flaherty ostensibly would like to present medical knowledge as a

means to assist those with debilitating writing disorders, she presents her own act of writing—and

thus her own book—as if it were primarily a psychological rather than rhetorical expression.[21]

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[21] One wonders why Flaherty wouldn't have elected to write a novel. But perhaps the most interesting way to read *The Midnight Disease* is as a kind of a novel: outside the realm of science, Flaherty no longer feels the pressure of scientific rigor, and so attempts to create a book that is a kind of philosophical fiction. Insofar as Flaherty never finds a stable form for this endeavor, perhaps she is best seen as a victim of early-twenty-first-century generic limitations: a clearly gifted, hypergraphic writer without a genre. Clearly she values literature and thinks of herself as a writer, and would like to call *The Midnight Disease* a work of literature. Yet it would seem preposterous, today, to propose a work of scientific philosophy outside a specific discipline such as analytic philosophy, let alone to present a work of neuroscience as "literature" as James more or less did in the letter to his brother in 1890. See my discussion of James's representation of *The Principles of Philosophy* to Henry James in Part One, Section II (16-17).

Even when writer's block is treated historically, or etymologically, it can be very difficult to negotiate. In contrast to Weber and Flaherty, Leader's comprehensive *Writer's Block*, by far the most informative study on the subject, attempts a historical approach to block. Leader begins critically, correctly identifying writer's block as "a new and shadowy term but also (or therefore) a loose one, frequently misapplied" (18). His "aim," he claims, "is to sort out the term's looser and more vulnerable applications from those that actually mean something—a task that entails looking as carefully at the terms *writer* and *writing* as *block*" (18). These are realistic, potentially productive goals, but simply stating them does not insulate Leader from the negative logic the myth of block facilitates, or from propagating the myth. Citing a broad array of writers and poets in his introduction, however conspicuously white and male—Philip Roth, Philip Larkin, William Wordsworth, E.M. Forster, Mark Twain, Joseph Conrad, Anthony Burgess, and Dashiell Hammett—Leader provides an occasion for defining block by drawing from the process reflections of writers themselves. In some cases, it can seem as if Leader's writers really are looking for the better vocabulary he hopes to chart. Consider Leader's citation of Forster, who stopped publishing fiction at forty-five after the publication of *A Passage to India* (1924) even though he lived until 1970, to the age of ninety-one. Leader cites a letter by Forster to his friend the writer Forrest Reid, "I think that I've stopped creating rather than become uncreative…I have never felt I'm used up. It's rather that the scraps of imagination and observations in me won't coalesce as they used to. Whether I'm happy or sad or well or unwell…the internal condition doesn't change" (Cited in Leader, 11). Forster's apparent attempt to describe an enigmatic creative crisis (or anti-crisis) signifies, for Leader, a terminological failure: "That Forster…resorts to metaphors of dearth and desiccation to describe his problems, and that they creep in again in the very next sentence (in 'scraps' and the implication that the power to coalesce is lacking), suggests the need for a new—and more precise—

terminology" (12). Leader correctly notes the oddity of Forster's negative constructions, which presuppose a standard of high output when it comes to the production of literature. Surely Forster's impulse to explain his transformation in terms of "dearth" rather than retirement, as well as the peculiar claim that he has "stopped creating rather than become uncreative," are inversions worth dwelling on since they suggest cultural assumptions about what form a literary career ought to take, as if writing novel after novel, after an initial publication success, were a normal literary career path rather than itself an exceptional achievement.

Yet to the same end of articulating a common vocabulary for discussing crises of literary production, Leader makes his next point through a brazenly simplistic reading of Mark Twain's experience writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Abruptly retreating from Forster, Leader moves to a discussion of Twain's supposed creative crisis in writing his most famous and influential novel. Identifying the rough outline of the production narrative of *Huck Finn*, which took eight years to complete, Leader explains that Twain periodically suspended work on the novel to publish several other books, notably for a period of three years after completing most of Chapter XVI. According to Leader, Twain did not know how to go on after he had "brought Huck and Jim to the mouth of the Ohio at Cairo, Illinois" because he couldn't imagine the section of the narrative where Jim would be freed (12), by travelling up the Ohio River by steamboat as Huck proposes at the beginning of Chapter XV.[22] Yet rather than imagine this had anything to do with the moral question of whether or not Jim should be freed, which constitutes Huck's main moral quandary in the second half of the novel, Leader supposes that Twain's difficulty was writer's block, that his decision to continue down the river was actually highly personal, and mainly psychological:

> The technical problem that prevented Twain from completing *Huck Finn* rose out of

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[22] "We judged that three nights more would fetch us to Cairo, at the bottom of Illinois, where the Ohio River comes in, and that was what we was after. We would sell the raft and get on a steamboat and go way up the Ohio amongst the free States, and then be out of trouble" (Twain 93).

a desire to continue down the Mississippi. This desire has been explained in common-sense terms: Twain knew the lower Mississippi from his plotting days and did not know the Ohio. But there is also a plausible psychological explanation, one that sees Twain as caught up in precisely the sort of conflict outlined by Freud and the early or orthodox psychoanalytic theorists [whom Leader describes in a subsequent chapter]. According to this view, the logic of the plot and what Henry Nash Smith calls "actual freedom" or "an outward condition" stand ranged against an internal or "subjective" meaning, one associated with the author's past and with a realm beyond or outside logic and social restraint. Only when these earlier or inner pressures are admitted is the creative flow—how apt the metaphor at this point—released. (13-14)

The "common-sense" view Leader cites is an interpretation that has been made elsewhere,[23] but to suppose Twain could not have imagined the setting of the Ohio River because he was unfamiliar with the terrain enforces the terms of a twentieth-century convention with arguable relevance for a nineteenth-century author: that a realistic work must be based upon firsthand experience. This is an especially strange explanation for the second half of *Huck Finn*, where some of the novel's most imaginative and morally fraught episodes take place. Leader's subsequent explanation of the continued journey beyond Cairo as "one associated with the author's past and with a realm outside logic and social restraint" discards the highly complex moral questions raised by the second half of Twain's novel, which bore upon the troubled world of Reconstruction into which *Huck Finn* as a

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[23] For instance, in the notes to the most recent Penguin edition of *Huck Finn*, Guy Cardwell provides a similar explanation: "In August 1876, Clemens seems to have completed this chapter and most of the following one before running into difficulties and setting the manuscript aside. The book was developing into something more than an episodic, lighthearted tale for boys, and, besides, he knew nothing of the Ohio River country that Jim should have turned toward" (324, n. 14).

historical novel was written, imagining that the composition of *Huck Finn* was no more than an expression of Twain's "desire" to remain in some extended, romantic dream.

Leader writes, "Once Twain comes to terms with his decision—or desire—to continue downstream, several of his finest and most famous of his descriptions of the beauty of the river and river life flow forth from him—followed by a surge of creative activity" (13). This may be true, but to read the production of *Huck Finn* as primarily a function of Twain's psychology, and to locate its value in its descriptive rather than rhetorical power, is to precariously shift the meaning of his novel away from the social and political realm, where it acquires its most nuanced cultural significance as more than a children's adventure story.[24] After citing several instances where Huck expresses the pleasure of continuing down the river and the "freedom" of the heterotopia of the raft, Leader directly explains the benefits of thinking of Twain as "blocked":

> These instances suggest that the real problems confronting Twain in *Huck Finn* were psychological rather than technical, and that therefore it makes sense to refer to him as blocked. The term brings us closer to the nature of his difficulty; takes us beyond or behind problems of plot and structure. Its strength lies in its precision as a metaphor, its ability to describe economically a situation or problem for which no other comparably accurate means of description exists. Support for this view can be found in Twain's oft-expressed longing for escape or release in the letters of this period; in his failure to complete any book-length project between July 1875 and January 1880, "a much longer period than usual"; and in the relative unsatisfactoriness of what was published in the two years that followed. (14)

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[24] The mistake is not unlike what Ralph Ellison accused Ernest Hemingway of forgetting about *Huck Finn* in Hemingway's famous advice to stop reading the novel where Jim is stolen from the boys because the rest of the novel is "cheating" (*Green Hills of Africa* 22). In Ellison's conception, Huck's knowledge "that he must *at least make the attempt* to get Jim free" is essential; without it, the novel "becomes the simple boy's book that many would rather it be, a fantasy born of pure delight and not really serious at all" (267-8). See my discussion of Ellison and Hemingway in Part Two, Section IV (203-221).

In the case of Forster, the problem of discussing the struggle of literary production was terminological, a matter of incomplete euphemisms for his own, self-identified change in creative output. In Leader's conception, Forster "*resorts* to metaphors of dearth and desiccation," which need correcting. A similar problem marks this account of Twain—a matter of insufficient vocabulary— but here Leader presents *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* alongside remarks by the author as evidence of Twain's incomplete expression. Apparently the "real problems confronting Twain in *Huck Finn*" are not resolved in the text of *Huck Finn*, and so it is necessary to look outside the text, "beyond or behind problems of plot and structure" to psychology, in order to properly understand the novel.

Yet perhaps more than any other nineteenth-century American novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* knows and celebrates its own imperfection. Aesthetic imperfection, in fact, is one of the novel's most culturally significant themes, and *Huck Finn* is often cited as a work that opened channels of access for regional American voices. This is perhaps best expressed in the novel's final line, where Huck renounces writing: "there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing to no more" (444). What is important to recognize in Leader's reading of Twain isn't his recognition of the novel as flawed, but his impulse to explain Twain's novel as an act of finally perfected psychological art rather than morally fraught, imperfect communication. This is the assumption that makes the idea of writer's block possible in the first place; prioritizing the novel as a work of psychological or cognitive art—a direct game of give and take with the author's brain— which situates the novel's rhetorical dimensions in the backstage, "beyond or behind" the text. Whereas Weber risks reducing literary works to their most basic material existence, Leader, although he astutely broaches the possibility of block's historical nature, would direct the reader away from literature entirely.

"The Secret Miracle"

In "The Secret Miracle," Jorge Luis Borges offers an instructive metacritical short fiction satirizing the possibility that the communicative aspect of a work of literature really could be put out of the picture altogether. Although the story does not emerge from or take place in an American context, Borges imagines a near-perfect work of psychological realism—a work that exists almost entirely in the mind—and the story satirically, and for our purposes instructively, renders the cultural paradigm that has allowed the myth of writer's block to flourish. The story tracks the execution of Jaromir Hladik, a minor Czech writer of Jewish ancestry who is murdered by the Nazis before he can finish his magnum opus, a verse drama entitled *The Enemies*, of which he has completed only one of three acts (although he knows the full structure of the work). After his arrest, which takes place in Prague in the fourth year of the Nazi occupation in March 1943 (a few days after the arrival of the "armored vanguard of the Third Reich" on March 14 (88)), Hladik is sentenced to die for protesting the *Anschluss* and for his Jewish ancestry. Between the moment of his sentence and the final night before his execution, which the Gestapo delays for ten days in order "to proceed impersonally and slowly, after the manner of vegetables and plants" (89)—despite its grim theme "The Secret Miracle" is full of jokes—Hladik dwells mostly on the prospect of the firing squad, in his imagination dying "hundreds of deaths in courtyards…with real terror (perhaps with real bravery)" (89). On the last night, finally, he thinks of his literary legacy, regretting his procrastination and, as the anonymous narrator makes a point to inform the reader, his egotistical conception of writerly posterity: "Aside from a few friendships and many habits, the problematic exercise of literature constituted his life. Like all writers, he measured the achievements of others by what they had accomplished, asking of them that they measure him by what he envisaged or planned" (90). Here, the reader learns Hladik had planned his redemption though *The Enemies*, a psychological drama in verse about madness. In the play, Hladik's protagonist fends off a complex conspiracy for three acts

only to discover, in the play's final lines, that he himself is a madman he thought to be involved in the conspiracy; the play "is the circular delirium that [the protagonist] lives and relives endlessly" (91). Borges's narrator describes *The Enemies* in greater depth, but for our purposes it is enough to say its basic structure is not unlike David Fincher's film *Fight Club* (1999), where the audience is not aware that two characters are in fact a single, delusional person until nearly the end of the film. Although Hladik is uncertain about the moral worth of his play—"Hladik had never asked himself whether this tragicomedy of errors was preposterous or admirable" (91)—he nevertheless believes it might serve as his redemption. According to the narrator, Hladik thought this "plot…was best contrived to cover up his defects and point up his abilities and held the possibility of allowing him to redeem (symbolically) the meaning of his life" (91). Hours before his 9:00AM execution, Hladik decides to pray to God asking for a year's reprieve to complete his play. The next morning, the firing squad assembles, and the morning proceeds as expected until Hladik hears the command to fire.

Here, the story's ingenious pivot arrives, a one line paragraph which disrupts an until now realist narrative mode: "The physical universe came to a halt" (93). Standing "paralyzed" with the soldiers' guns still pointed at him, frozen in time, it takes two full days for Hladik to realize what has transpired. Apparently his wish has been answered: "He had asked God for a whole year to finish his work; His omnipotence had granted it. God had worked out a secret miracle for him" (93). Although Hladik has "no document but his memory," fortunately he has memorized the play on account of its verse form. In fact the play's hexameter has cultivated in him "a discipline unsuspected by those who set down and forget temporary, incomplete paragraphs" (94). Suddenly extremely "grateful" for the unexpected, cosmic literary fellowship, he sets to work finishing the drama, although with the knowledge that now he is "not working for posterity or even for God, whose literary tastes were unknown to him" (94).

Freed from the responsibility to communicate with other living human beings, and yet still convinced that the writing of literature is the business of humans rather than God, Hladik is prolific. Although he is not presented in the realist portion of the story as an especially reluctant writer, his "equivocal, uninspired" literary past left him unsatisfied and "with a complex feeling of repentance" (90) (his book on the "the indirect Jewish sources of Jakob Böhme" had been "characterized essentially by mere application" (88, 90); his philosophical study "*Vindication of Eternity* perhaps had fewer shortcomings," but also was built upon "fallacious" arguments which "Hladik was in the habit of going over…with a kind of contemptuous perplexity" (90); his "series of Expressionist poems" were published in an anthology in 1924, but "to the poet's chagrin…no subsequent anthology but inherited them" (90)). But once he is physically confined to the task of his drama for exactly one year—not just a Marcel Proust in a cork-lined room, but a virtual Descartes considering the confines of his own mind—Hladik no longer defers his literary fate to the future. He "writes" and rewrites his drama in his head until the moment of his death:

> Meticulously, motionlessly, secretly, he wrought in time his lofty, invisible labyrinth. He worked the third act over twice. He eliminated certain symbols as over-obvious…Nothing hurried him. He omitted, he condensed, he amplified. In certain instances he came back to the original version. He came to feel an affection for the courtyard, the barracks; one of the faces before him modified his conception of Roemerstadt's character [the main character in *The Enemies*]. He discovered that the wearying cacophonies that bothered Flaubert so much as mere visual superstitions, weakness and limitation of the written word, not the spoken…He concluded his drama. He had only the problem of a single phrase. He found it. The drop of water slid down his cheek. He opened his mouth in a maddened cry, moved his face, dropped under the quadruple blast.

Jaromir Hladik died on March 29, at 9:02 A.M. (94, second ellipsis original)

As is the case with much of Borges's work, it is easy to dwell on the novelty of the clever thought experiment at the story's core, on how a condemned writer reacts to a year's reprieve. Yet Borges's point in this parable has little to do with this fantastic, hypothetical question, and everything to do with the real critical scenario it brilliantly satirizes. Throughout the story, the narrator's tone is that of the droll, critic-historian which Borges cultivates in many of his *ficciones* (perhaps most famously in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"), but the reader knows no external observer could ever really have access to Hladik's "secret miracle." And this, in fact, is exactly Borges's point: Hladik aspired, in life, to create a validating work of psychological art, but if a literary work were really psychological art no one would have access to it, not even the schematic version Borges's narrator provides. If true psychological realism exists in the instant between the Gestapo's execution order and Hladik's "maddened cry," the only thing to which the outside observer has access is the cry. The possibility that we would be able to read Hladik's mind, or receive his hexameter psychological drama, during a "halt" of the "physical universe" is only a meaningful philosophical possibility insofar as it is a clever intellectual joke. Attempts to find the "secret miracles" of unpublished literary works, to imagine what lays "beyond and behind" literary texts as Leader would have it, are, in Borges's perception, fantasy.

The temporal fermata at the end of "The Secret Miracle" is not science fiction for the sake of readerly entertainment. The story takes the real cultural assumption that literature might be the product of secret, psychological miracles to an absurd extreme. It also satirizes the possibility that Hladik's play, which all along sought to formalize psychology by rendering madness, should be a form of moral redemption, even had he finished and circulated it under normal circumstances. Hladik's play, which he hoped would be his redemption, becomes a "secret," in fact utterly private work of literature; his ego, no longer burdened by the "visual superstitions, weakness and limitation

of the written word," can render itself as art without having to burden itself with the problem of communication. At this point, Hladik isn't even concerned with God's enigmatic "literary tastes," even though some higher power ostensibly granted him his reprieve. In "The Secret Miracle," Borges's thus deadpans the following critical joke: *given the extent to which this writer thought the completion of his psychological drama would be his redemption, he might as well have expected his God to grant him a secret miracle!* Surely Jaromir Hladik, who signed a petition against the *Anschluss* and was certainly aware of the brutality of the war machine of the Third Reich, ought to imagine that God would have better things to do in Prague in March 1943 than provide him with a cosmic fellowship to write his redemption in the form of a personal, psychological drama. Hladik may be, in the first place, a Holocaust victim, but that does not make his wish for a "secret miracle," and his participation in the private miracle, anything less than an amoral delusion, which is the dark irony Borges dares his reader to glean from the story.

The possibility that "secret miracles" take place in the backstage areas of literary production imagines writing literature as an act of private genius and moral redemption. This is absurd: no writer is capable of calculating a literary text's rhetorical circuit—its precise audience once it has been published, let alone its lasting canonical position—in advance. As Borges points out, to achieve this level of rhetorical acumen would be to inhabit an utterly solipsistic universe: a frozen year before a firing squad, a temporal and moral fermata amid the Holocaust granted by a silent, servant God. This is what Hladik's play always sought, Borges jokes, only taken to an extreme: to redeem Hladik "symbolically" as a psychological expression. And yet even Hladik himself, before he realizes that his secret miracle is a secret miracle, feels a desperate pressure to "communicate": "He imagined that the now remote soldiers [his executioners, arrayed before him] must be sharing his anxiety; he longed to be able to communicate with them" (93). In fact—and this is the brutal irony of Borges's Holocaust parable—there are no secret miracles in literature. Accepted literary works, whenever they

convey recognizable human truths, are by definition *public miracles*: the miracle of literature lies neither in the realm of its production nor in that of its consumption exclusively, but in astonishing coincidences of metaphysical compromise and public appreciation. The momentum of a literary career can provide a context for the positive reception of subsequent works, but literary recognition depends far more on the possibility of subtle communication than it does on an author's private genius, which is very difficult to predict.

To cite a famous, extreme case, the extent to which the poems of Emily Dickinson were literature when they were unknown and stuffed in her dresser drawer depends upon what you pragmatically mean by "literature." But there can be no question that they have constituted literature since generous readers and critics proved it was possible to retrospectively suspend their gut reactions to formal opacity in order to embrace Dickinson's philosophical and linguistic nuance. The story by which Dickinson's poems became canonical—unquestionably literary—is hard to explain, and assuredly complex, but it depends not only upon the precarious intelligibility of her poems, which may or may not have been an inevitable result of whatever secret poetic genius Dickinson possessed, but also their precarious existence and passage into critical appreciation.

Borges's "secret miracle" is not writer's block, but it is a closely related mythic specimen, which, like block, depends upon the mistaken assumption that literary representation purchases its realism through psychological intimacy instead of through its success as written communication. Because it is contained—imagined under the sign of irony by Borges in a clever parable—I present it here in order to show how block works and to explain an aspect of the method of the present study. Hladik's *The Enemies* sought to be a personally redemptive work of psychological realism; Borges jokes that such a work, conceived amid the atrocities of World War II, might as well be the product of extreme solipsism. Writer's block seeks to explain how psychological crisis prevents writers from completing works of literature, deprioritizing literature's communicative aspects. If Hladik had not

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been executed by the Nazis and yet still had never finished *The Enemies*, if he had continued to rely on "what he envisaged or planned" as the basis of his achievement, he might have been retrospectively labeled "blocked." Hladik's "secret miracle," which is what Borges imagines might have replaced his utter silence, is writer's block turned inside out. Through it, Borges asks his reader a vital humanist question: if we imagine realism to rely upon "secret miracles" in its genesis, and to thus consist in psychological intimacy, to what extent does that act disguise the real injustices, in some cases the atrocities, which prevent the *completion* and *publication* of such miracles? Surely the Holocaust prevented the writing of many excellent works of literature, but imagining retrospectively what those works might have looked like, as Borges pretends to do as narrator of "The Secret Miracle," evades the Holocaust as a moral problem for literary communication in pursuit of a mythical work of ideal psychological realism. Borges, who is best read as a critic-philosopher, brilliantly jokes about the Holocaust to draw attention to the moral stakes of such a gesture. The present study approaches writer's block with Borgesian skepticism to raise similar concerns, albeit in a very different cultural context. No event in American history directly compares to the Holocaust. But to speculate on the unwritten works of American literature under the pretenses of understanding block is to pursue unknowable psychological intimacies while evading realistic investigations of social and political conditions which, like the Holocaust, have significantly disrupted the production and dissemination of important literary achievements.

IV. REALISM

Writer's block is a myth because there are no secret literary miracles, only public miracles of the fundamentally impulsive human will to write. The myth exists, however, as a byproduct of the notion that psychology could be the determining formal concern of realism, which may be a more important development in twentieth-century American literature than modernism and the set of formal and thematic revolutions that term usually implies. Since the first decades of the twentieth-century, the assumption that literature can represent reality as a function of the logic of the mind has been central to its production, consumption, and study in the US, especially in the case of the novel. From the notion of the "stream-of-consciousness" novel, which I have already shown is a term crudely appropriated to literary contexts from its complex origins in James's *Principles*, to the enormous influence of psychoanalysis and the notion of the unconscious on literary symbolism, and more recently to clinical conceptions of mental wellness and illness, which often posit writing as a form of psychic release and even therapy, modern American writers found themselves working in a culture that saw realistic novel-writing as a professional struggle with the inner-workings and increasingly the health of the mind. To be certain, there have been benefits from this development, and not just for deliberate post-Cartesian adventurers. The primacy of psychological realism underwrote a broad range of formal and metafictional experiments, most notably in the context of modernism, helping to renew literature in the wake of fracturing wars and social transformations. It also helped make possible the widespread recognition of American ethnic canons, as well as the arrival of university creative writing programs as a major engine of postwar literary production,[25] because on the surface psychological realism appears to embrace experiential pluralism by privileging the value of individual identity and questions of identity formation.

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[25] See McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010.

Ideally, psychological realism should diminish the importance of the gap between *representation* and *represented world*—what might alternately be called *the telling* and *the tale*—making it possible to render in fiction a much broader array of human experience. The notion that a novel could abandon pretenses of objectivity and simulate a psychological transcript, whether conceived as a "stream-of-consciousness" inner monologue, a manic confession, a necessarily fragmented story, a dream narrative, a psychoanalytic purge, or a combination of these and other forms, has made possible a diverse array of literary characters and novelistic frames. Historically speaking, by opening new pathways to novelistic recognition for characters damaged by factors such as trauma, disability, social injustice, and for that matter post-industrial enervation, the psychologically realistic novel has radically democratized the canon. A brief, hardly exhaustive list of specific innovations include psychographic representations (i.e., William Faulkner's renderings of the inner states of the mentally disabled and suicidal in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)), narratives governed by painfully repressed experiences (Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)), novels of shifting identity (Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929); James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956)), as well as portraits of mental illness, disorder, and breakdown (Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945); Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963); Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970); Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994); Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (1996); Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011)). Whether one considers the psychological purpose of realistic novel-writing a matter of healing, confession, revenge, cautionary telling, or simply expression, the basic possibility that a novel could represent the inner workings of the individual human mind is the condition that makes it possible for aspiring authors to pick up a pen and *write what you know*, as the creative writing program maxim goes; just as the idea of a novel as a psychological simulator has made the process of readerly identification much easier. Psychological realism liberalized the novel, which had already been the

world's preeminent imaginative genre of social critique, by promoting marginal and in many cases damaged voices.

But as I have already suggested, the contract of psychological realism also depends upon a rhetorically problematic formal assumption. In psychological realism, formal realism—a mode defined by concerns with how book-length works come to justify their existence, concerns of the sort that plagued early character-narrators in works such as *Oroonoko, Robinson Crusoe*, *Pamela*, and *Tristram Shandy*,[26] and which became a special concern for nineteenth-century American novelists working to prove their authority[27]—gives way to the reader's perception of psychological intimacy as the litmus test for a fiction's success. The rhetorical conditions of a psychological novel's telling, however ultimately imagined, thus become less relevant to its realism. This shift is easiest to witness in bold psychological thought experiments, such as Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner's wager that the reader will take his novel seriously depends upon the reader's assumed recognition of psychological intimacy as the mark of realism, as Faulkner intends to carry the reader into the worlds of characters who could not have possibly written the narratives containing them. The extent to which the reader can manage to enter the impossible narratives of Benjy and Quentin Compson— one mentally disabled and the other on the day of his suicide—despite the impossibility of those narratives existing as writing, becomes the measure of the novel's success. The realism of *The Sound and the Fury* depends fundamentally on the reader's ability to suspend the expectation that a character could have told, let alone could have *written* his own story as an act of interpersonal communication.

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[26] Aphra Behn's autobiographical narrator in *Oroonoko* expresses the difficult of writing the first half of her story, which treats the story of African prince Oroonoko before he arrives on the plantation where she is staying in Surinam. Daniel Defoe's Crusoe meditates at length on the difficulty of maintaining a journal while on his island, and finds himself particularly perplexed about how to respond to the event of his arrival on the island. Samuel Richardson's Pamela Andrews continually expresses her frustration that her letters to her father are being interrupted by her household duties and advances by Mr. B---, while her brother Joseph in Henry Fielding's "comic romance" is embroiled in a third-person narrative largely *about* its metafictional struggle to settle on a narrative mode. And perhaps most famously, Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy finds himself bewildered by the fact that his life is always expiring amid his attempts to write it down, and his wildly digressive reactions to the problem of life-writing would signal the novel's capacity to support radical formal inventiveness long before modernist imperatives in the twentieth century.
[27] See my discussion of Hawthorne in the Epilogue (239-240).

Although the question of whether Faulkner inadvertently creates psychological spectacle may loom, his goal is to use the reader's interest in psychology to create an imaginative bridge to impossible experiences, and thus to reveal latent dimensions of an epic story. The reader who makes sense of the plight of Benjy or Quentin supposedly becomes like Hladik's God in "The Secret Miracle": witness to an impossible, solipsistic psychological drama.

Yet the same narrative logic can also extend to formally stable psychological novels which simply decline to give clues into the circumstances of their telling. An excellent example of this can be found in Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945). Although Himes's first novel is often approached in the long shadow of "the intellectual and political consequences of Richard Wright's *Native Son*" (Eburne 807), *If He Hollers Let Him Go* is actually, in its own right, one of the most structurally crystallized psychological novels in the twentieth-century American canon. In it, narrator-protagonist Bob Jones explains a four-day psychological breakdown he experienced—characterized by paranoia and increasingly frantic behavior—in response to false, racially charged allegations made against him in Los Angeles during World War II. The power of Himes's novel, a frank, at times brutal account of American inequality written on the eve of the Civil Rights Movement, comes from its psychological and moral intimacy, from the narrator's apparent ability to revisit his near breakdown and intelligibly narrate it for an audience. Bob Jones courageously tells his own story, and the novel tracks the cascade of events that led to him being falsely accused of a crime. Yet it is never clear, in the novel, whether Jones's explanation has specific rhetorical circumstances beyond those created by the general political challenge presented by the clever pun of Jones's title, which converts a line from racist children's rhyme into an ironic plea. There are several references to Jones's literary interests in the text—he has some college education and, as we find out in an off-hand remark, he is a reader of Tolstoy (150)—yet there are few clues for the reader as to *when* the narrative is being presented, and for that matter *where, for whom,* and *why*. The novel's ending

is moreover deliberately abrupt, like a punch-line. After Bob compromises with the police, who agree to drop a false charge of rape if Bob enlists in the military, the novel concludes with a one-line paragraph: "Two hours later I was in the army" (203). Significantly, this gesture—however dramatic as a final flourish—precludes whatever subsequent account the reader might have expected of how Bob came to the moment of apparent clarity where he was able to reflect on his breakdown.

The problem is that the text of *If He Hollers Let Him Go* is hardly just hollering, hardly a "secret miracle." Rather it is an analytic, introspective narrative running some two-hundred pages. There is, after all, no reason why the reader should suppose that Jones's narrative requires a willing suspension of formal realism in the manner of Faulkner, insofar as the novel ends with Jones remaining alive and with his mental faculties either intact or salvageable. Is the novel Jones's attempt to work out the logic of the four-day breakdown for himself? Is it an explanation for his girlfriend Alice, who frequently criticizes Jones for failing to accept his station in a racist society? Is it an explanation for the police, so they might better understand how irrational persecution creates fear, which sublimates in similarly irrational ways?

Of course a novel could simulate any of these rhetorical situations, or for that matter all of them at once. But if the novel's existence suggests Jones's continued survival, to what extent does it also suggest his intellectual and affective growth, or for that matter the development of his political and moral consciousness? Himes is rightly reluctant to unnecessarily propagate dubious *bildungsroman* logic, to suggest there is carriage readily available on the train of American progress for a Bob Jones or, for that matter, that collective progress is necessarily desirable. Yet Jones's articulate, moving narrative suggests that some intellectual or emotional progress has taken place since his breakdown. The absence of metafictional reflection thus marks a missed opportunity to further advance the novel's political trajectory. If Jones had simply managed a crude *holler* against racial injustice, to redeploy the language of Himes's title, the society against which he raised his protest might just as

simply offer him his freedom and look the other way. Yet because he clearly manages to reflect on his experience, to rationalize his descent into near-madness, and to render in his own fiction his struggle as a political allegory, that society should be held to a higher standard: atoning for the further trials a Bob Jones surely would have endured in pursuit of the material and psychological stability it takes to rise to the level of rhetorical articulation he achieves in the book-length prose work based on his experience. Against considerable inertia, as if by fiat, Bob Jones wrote a subtle, artful novel, and the realist literary conventions permitting the elision of that fact—permitting the reader to overlook the rhetorical education of Bob Jones—are not only paradoxical, but potentially undemocratic.

If he hollers—if he is psychologically traumatized by a racist society and can only muster the strength to merely express his mental plight—*by all means let him go*. But if he achieves a compelling argument for equality, showing how the insidious logic of race propagates by facing in writing his own near-breakdown, under the sign of the ironic joke that it is merely "hollering," then that gesture presents society (via Himes's reader and critic) with a greater obligation. In James's language, in writing his narrative Bob Jones pursued action in the direction of "greatest resistance." This moral action is an occasion to question rhetorical institutions, including institutions of literary education as well as realist fictional genres themselves, and how they support or discourage the complexity of his gesture.

Realism writes a contract—always—between author and society. Depending upon sociopolitical context, realist works may not necessarily have an obligation to go beyond diagnosis or even expression in order to complete their rhetorical objectives (although in cases where realist representation means expression, the rhetorical activity of a text may be limited to reification; for example, as in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper or works of nineteenth-century British social realism). But Himes's novel, which strongly implies the possibility of rhetorical transcendence and

moral action, was written into an unjust sociopolitical context where there was obvious need for protest. Himes's reluctance to explain the specific means by which Bob Jones became the writer he obviously was capable of becoming thus implies a considerable gap between conceptions of individual and social responsibility when it comes to the general question of rhetorical (and, for that matter, literary) education. By this I do not mean that Himes somehow *failed* in his representation of Bob Jones's experience. Rather, the absence of a realistic narrative accounting for his emergence indicates a culture unconcerned with rhetorical education as a necessary element of realism, and satisfied with the hermetic work of literary art—the ostensibly "finished" novel—as evidence of rhetorical authority. For all their democratizing power, works of psychological realism are thus finally problematic because they do not have to be rhetorically complete in order to be formally complete, to be published and accepted by the public. For James, "[w]hoever says that in raising his arm he is ignorant of how many muscles he contracts, in what order of sequence, and in what degrees of intensity, expressively avows a colossal amount of unconsciousness of the processes of motor discharge" (499). Yet this should not deter us, James also asserts, from pursuing those "unconscious" processes: they present a philosophical problem rather than an alibi. The situation may be similar for dealing with a novel, where there is always a "colossal amount" of information of which the reader is inevitably not conscious, but psychological novels write the irrelevance of such information into their basic contract.

This scenario leaves a peculiar byproduct on the surface of the narrative: if one knows to look for it, it actually draws attention to the novel as artifice. For instance, Jones's narrative is replete with introspection, and loosely structured by four dream-sequences that Jones claims to have had during the four-day psychological collapse, each of which gives way to first-person recollection and dialogue. Compared with the opaque opening of *The Sound and the Fury*, where the reader is abruptly transported into the worldview of the mentally disabled Benjy Compson, these dreams are hardly

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disorienting. They are always presented as dreams, in fact as philosophical puzzles—mostly about fear, humiliation, and irrational injustice—presumably intended to bear allegorically on the narrative at large. For instance, Himes's opening sequence of three dreams is clearly designed to illustrate several dimensions of the inner-psychology of Bob Jones: he wants to purchase a dog but cannot bring it home, he sees the absurdity of police practices but can do nothing about them but laugh, he feels the humiliation of searching for recognition in a racist society and knows it as a kind of hysteria. Himes begins with a straightforward representation of dreams as dreams—"I dreamed a fellow asked me if I wanted a dog and I said yeah, I'd like to have a dog…" (1)—which shift, clearly, when they break down negatively: "Then I turned over and dreamed on the other side" (1); "Then I turned over and dreamed on my back" (2). Jones's dreams are also clearly partitioned from reality, if that is how we think of Jones's waking state: "Suddenly I came awake. For a time I laid there without thought, suspended in a vacancy. There was no meaning to anything; I didn't even remember having dreamed" (2). Yet notice Jones's peculiar remark about not remembering "having dreamed," and what this implies about the novel's larger epistemology. If Jones remembers, in the writing or telling of his narrative, that he "didn't even remember having dreamed" at the moment after his dreams occurred, how can he expect the reader to imagine that he vividly remembers those dreams *now,* in the writing or telling of the story? Clearly those dreams are not a "memory," but Jones's creation, even though Jones is himself a creation. The moment is an imaginative accident, where Himes—who is himself imagining Jones's dreams, whether or not they are modeled on his own—projects his imaginative act onto his narrator, whose status as a writer of fiction is otherwise uncertain.

Novelistic realism gets away with exactly as much approximation, as much "shooting from the hip," as the reader will accept. This shift from dream to reality probably does not call attention to itself as a formal seam in Himes's novel, let alone raise the prospect that Himes may be what is

sometimes called an "unreliable narrator." Himes doesn't flinch because he knows the reader won't flinch either: the psychological intimacy of Jones's revealing dreams is such that it is far more interesting to take those dreams seriously than it is to question whether he really could have remembered them (even when he openly admits that he did not). Although aspects of Bob Jones's experience are modeled on Himes's own,[28] the novel is not, finally, autobiographical. Yet here we witness Jones, whom the reader already presumes is writing some sort of retrospective, autobiographical document, openly participating in the writing of fiction. All novelistic representation is fictional and approximate, and sometimes full of designed or accidental mistakes, but when a fictional character purposefully or accidentally reveals his own status as the writer of the fiction in which he is contained, then the work implicitly takes on metafictional status. From the moment Jones shows he is fabricating the dreams he offers as keys to the understanding of his story, whatever psychological intimacy we have with Jones implicitly takes place under the sign of literary creation. The story of how Bob Jones came to be a writer of the imaginative narrative containing him could by implication exist, even though we do not have full access to it. In this way, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* describes a "secret miracle" not wholly unlike that contained in Borges's story, only without a comic narrator to absorb the reader's disbelief with the claim "The physical universe came to a halt." Here, the reader's disbelief is defused by the imaginative fiat permitted by psychological realism's contract, even though it remains legible within the narrative. How the "universe"—or, more accurately, racially divided American culture—afforded Jones the material and intellectual means, as well as the rhetorical context, to write his narrative is the novel's precariously unanswered, moral question.

The realistic irrelevance of the production narrative underlying *If He Hollers Let Him Go* marks the space that has allowed the myth of writer's block to flourish. We would not necessarily

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[28] See Himes, Chester. *The Quality of Hurt: The Early Years—The Autobiography of Chester Himes.* New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1986. 73-74.

say that Bob Jones was "blocked" during the time that passed between the four-day breakdown and the telling of the story, but the reader's presumed ambivalence to whatever real process (or "secret miracle") did take place—the assumption that it belongs to the biography of Chester Himes rather than to his writer-protagonist, which is a fictional contract to which Himes and his reader both consent—represents the common cultural soil where block myths grow. Psychological realism promotes the premise that such stories may be personal, that the crucible of imaginative genesis may be kept backstage, although it does not necessarily depend upon this premise. The myth of writer's block depends upon the same assumption, only it explains cases—both real and imagined—where an author's literary work, whether conceived in terms of a particular project or a career, are perceived to be incomplete (whether or not they are actually incomplete is irrelevant). Such cases presuppose the production of fiction as a personal, psychological problem, rather than an expression of larger sociopolitical questions, or for that matter a rhetorical expression *in the face* of such questions.

If He Hollers Let Him Go provides a good example of how psychological realism works because its formal structure is exceptionally clear. The novel takes place over a clearly articulated, four-day period, succeeded by a significant, unexplained lapse of time before the telling of the story commences, both of which are presented to the reader without explanation. But less organized psychological novels also conceal their metafictional dimensions—and through them important aspects of their moral realism—because the contract of psychological realism does not require those dimensions to be expressed. The historical moment of Himes's novel preceded the postwar psychoanalytic vogue in the US, Leader's "world of largely American…psychoanalytic aesthetics,"[29] as well as the generally increasing role of psychology in American conceptions of health, partly catalyzed by the 1952 publication of the original *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and

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[29] See my discussion of Leader's account of Edmund Bergler in Part One, Section III (64-68).

its various, subsequent revisions. Since then, the cultural currency of psychological realism and the entrenchment of psychological realism's contract have only increased. The metafictional stakes of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1971), for instance, are exceedingly high given the apparent clinical depression and suicide-attempt marking protagonist Esther Greenwood's experience, which of course are modeled on Plath's own experience and underscored by her infamous, successful suicide in London in 1963 at the age of thirty. The situation of *The Bell Jar* is complex given that the novel's popularity is largely an effect of Plath's life story, and the fact that it was only published in the US and under Plath's own name posthumously.[30] Plath is moreover mainly a poet; she usually privileged her poetry as her primary literary accomplishment, and her last book of poetry, *Ariel* (1965), published shortly after her death, was the volume that first catapulted her to literary recognition. Yet like *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, *The Bell Jar* also calls attention to its artifice, and moreover to its narrator-protagonist's unrequited literary ambition inside the timeframe of the novel-world, without explaining the specific conditions of its subsequent production. In fact Plath goes further; Esther Greenwood actually attempts to write a novel inside the world of *The Bell Jar* only to give it up, broaching the possibility of metafictional, formal realism and then abandoning it. For instance, once Greenwood returns to Massachusetts from her job in New York to spend the summer at home— the main context for the escalation of her depression—she finds out she was not admitted to a summer creative writing course in which she sought to enroll, and decides she will "spend the summer writing a novel" herself while also studying shorthand (119). That way, Greenwood "would

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[30] The story of the publication of *The Bell Jar* is intriguing, and can be read as a late legacy of the situation nineteenth-century authors faced regarding American copyright law, where American authors had difficulty competing with international authors in the US because the US did not recognize international copyright. Although Plath takes considerable imaginative license in the rendering of Greenwood's character, the novel has been described as a *roman a clef*, and despite interest from Harper to publish the novel, Plath's mother had an agreement with Ted Hughes for the novel to remain published in the United States until after her own death. Imported copies illegally were sold in New York, however, and in 1970 Random House contacted Harper informing them that *The Bell Jar* was subject to the copyright loophole "Ad Interim" because it was published abroad without being published in the US within six months. Harper negotiated with Random House given their existence agreement with Plath's estate, and the novel was forced into publication. See Frances McCullough's Foreword to *The Bell Jar*. 1971. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996. ix-xvii.

be killing two birds with one stone, writing a novel and learning something practical as well" (199).

This proves easier said than done. Here is Greenwood's account of the attempt (I have italicized the

text of Greenwood's novel to differentiate it from Plath's):

> I lay on the couch on the breezeway and shut my eyes. I could hear my mother
>
> clearing the typewriter and the papers from the card table and laying out the
>
> silver for supper, but I didn't move.
>
> *Inertia oozed like molasses through Elaine's limbs. That's what it must feel like to have*
>
> *malaria, she thought.*
>
> At that rate, I'd be lucky if I wrote a page a day.
>
> Then I knew what the trouble was.
>
> I needed experience.
>
> How could I write about life when I'd never had a love affair or a baby or
>
> even seen anybody die? A girl I knew had just won a prize for a short story about her
>
> adventures among the pygmies in Africa. How could I compete with that sort of
>
> thing? (121)

The reader encounters Greenwood as a woman struggling to write a novel, unable to write because

she sees her own experience as deficient of novelty and interest. Before long, Greenwood gives up

both the novel and the prospect of the shorthand class: "I decided I would put off the novel until I

had gone to Europe and had a lover, and that I would never learn a word of shorthand. If I never

learned shorthand I would never have to use it" (122). In Greenwood's struggle and rapid

abandonment of her novel, and Plath's satirical parallelism where Greenwood should write fiction

by day and prepare herself for secretarial work by night, Plath offers a criticism of the unequal

literary and employment opportunities women faced in the mid-twentieth century. She also shows

how those limitations can become internalized, a problem Greenwood would have to overcome to

become a novelist. Notably, Plath does not say that Greenwood is blocked because of some psychological deficiency, but rather suggests she is inhibited by comparing herself to peers with greater "experience." Yet the narrative's existence suggests Greenwood eventually reached a moment where she achieved the reflective capacity to explain this dark period of her life. The book ultimately does not provide this metanarrative, except insofar as Greenwood's stay at a mental hospital—an exceptionally mixed bag for Greenwood, involving shock treatments as well as camaraderie with other patients and a doctor—leads her to a state of arguable mental stability. When considering her departure for the hospital, Greenwood explains, "I had hoped, at my departure, I would feel sure and knowledgeable about everything that lay ahead—after all, I had been 'analyzed.' Instead, all I could see were question marks" (243). Presumably one could extrapolate a metafictional arc from this endpoint to the supposed writing of the narrative, and Plath assuredly had an excellent model for that arc in her own life experience, out of which *The Bell Jar* grew. Like Himes, however, Plath does not provide it.

Again, as it was in the case of Himes, this is not a failure, nor is it necessarily Plath's choice. The absence of an explanation for how this novel came to be written does not fundamentally undermine its rhetorical impact as a deconstruction of the cultural problems it surely manages to criticize, including the position of women in the American workforce, a mental health system which frequently saw women as mentally ill rather than facing social inequalities, as well as how gender inequality shapes women's writing and self-image. Nor does it limit the reader's ability to relate to Greenwood, or to identify affectively with her plight, which is frequently moving and by all accounts subtly rendered. It does, however, mark Plath's acceptance of a generic convention. The lack of a supplementary narrative linking Greenwood's experience inside the world of *The Bell Jar* to the perspective that would allow her to "analyze" for herself the "question marks" of her experience— analysis that might take on the form of Plath's surely satirical, direct comparison of the difference

between novel-writing and shorthand—indicates the presence of the same realist contract here that exists in Himes's novel, a contract of psychological realism assuming the reader needn't wonder how a character came to write her own story even though she clearly shows literary ambition and capability. Not insignificantly, the "inertia" Greenwood seeks to capture in her character "Elaine" in her opening line echoes the novel's own opening thematically, "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York" (1), suggesting the possible continuity between Greenwood's experience in the represented world of the novel and as the possible writer of that narrative. Plath almost certainly means to evoke this sort of formal symmetry as a value. Immediately after Greenwood declares she has abandoned her novel, she explains how she has decided to read *Finnegans Wake* instead: "I thought I would spend the summer reading *Finnegans Wake* and writing my thesis" (122); the opening line of *Finnegans Wake*— "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay" (qtd. in Plath 123)—a continuation of the novel's closing line, is cited on the next page. Yet *The Bell Jar* ends nearly as abruptly as Bob Jones's effective conscription, and its suggestions about Greenwood's future, who awaits to enter the hospital boardroom for the final meeting before her discharge, are no less idealistic: "The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room" (244). *Finnegans Wake* represents the idealized novelistic continuity to which Greenwood aspires—where the end of the novel is literally continuous with its beginning—and it matters that this level of continuity is not present in Plath's novel.

The stakes of literary self-representation could hardly have been higher than they were for Chester Himes and Sylvia Plath when they wrote their respective first novels. Their passages into the American literary canon are public miracles of modern American literature. The disinterest on the part of Himes and Plath to also model the novel-writing process, however, even though their

characters both demonstrate significant literary aspirations and intellectual gifts, indicates the dominance of a genre and a literary culture unconcerned with such questions. Questions such as *how did Bob Jones survive to write his own story* or *how did Esther Greenwood get the courage to confront her demons in a novel* nevertheless remain vital. The goal of the present study is to recognize the cultural value of such stories, which are the opposite of block myths and which offer moral possibility even when encountered by extrapolation, as in the case of Himes's novel or of Plath's, or incompletely in misunderstood works or works in progress by supposedly "blocked" writers. Psychological realism has been realism's dominant form in the US since at least World War I. What I roughly label moral realism, on the other hand, is an incipient, possible genre. It exists in the conventional gaps of psychological realism, in the untold but frequently implied—and usually possible—stories of how psychological novels come to be written. The writers I primarily address in Part Two—Joseph Mitchell, Henry Roth, and most notably Ralph Ellison—can only be labeled moral realists insofar as they model an alternate mode of realistic American writing incompletely, and frequently experimentally. Yet to take their attempts seriously is to imagine how the contract of American literary realism might be rewritten, and to engage a more inclusive definition of what constitutes literature. Showing what moral realism looks like is always a matter of reconstructing complex literary metanarratives, reading rhetorically, and taking seriously texts that are frequently incomplete, both in their own terms and in the terms of the literary establishment, but examining the aspects of these writers' careers that have led them to be labeled "blocked" temporarily or ultimately is a way of finding some orientation in the quest. Following a specific writer's block myth in the direction of moral realism is like following a trail of cairns across a desert. There is no well-blazed, conventional trail; only rough markers that one is in the presence of human intention, which blend easily into the landscape. Part Two of *The Myth of Writer's Block* follows several of these possible trails.

Let us conclude, however, with one final example of a more recent work of psychological realism, Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), which suggests one additional aspect of the genre's contract. Receiving glowing jacket endorsements from both Paul Auster and John Ashbery,[31] Lerner's first novel—which followed a series of three notable poetry collections, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004), *Angle of Yaw* (2006), and *Mean Free Path* (2010)—was a minor sensation when it appeared, earning a full-length review by James Wood in *The New Yorker* ("Reality Testing"). The semi-autobiographical novel retrospectively tracks the experience of a young poet's year spent in Madrid evading the responsibilities of a "prestigious fellowship"—presumably a Fulbright, like his author's—smoking a not inconsiderable amount of hash, and mistaking cultural misunderstanding for "negative capability" (52). Generally speaking, Adam Gordon is not a terribly likeable character. From his affected reticence about his Brown University education (in *Atocha* he refers to it exclusively as his time "in Providence") to his universal loathing of the other young Americans he encounters in Spain, he is a spot-on portrayal of a now familiar twenty-first-century American type: the privileged humanities graduate in aimless pursuit of the next chapter of his literary education on the Continent. Proudly medicated on anti-depressants and tranquillizers and obsessed with his mental state, in fact raised by psychologist parents, protagonist Gordon is perhaps the psychologically realistic narrator *par excellence*. The book—and Gordon's worldview—is nevertheless impacted by a historical crisis, the March 11, 2004 Al Qaeda commuter train bombings, which occur approximately halfway through the novel at the Atocha train station referenced in the title. Gordon is not involved in the attacks themselves, and so the question of psychological trauma does not enter into play, but he is a direct witness to their unreal aftermath: the massive, spontaneous vigils and

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[31] Auster: "Utterly charming. Lerner's self-hating, lying, overmedicated, brilliant fool of a hero is a memorable character, and his voice speaks with a music distinctly and hilariously all his own." Ashbery: "An extraordinary novel about the intersections of art and reality in contemporary life."

political protests that erupt in Madrid's streets, the mysterious disappearance of his North African hash dealers in the Plaza Santa Ana, as well as the March 14 elections Al Qaeda sought to influence.

Gordon's uncomfortable reluctance to come to terms with his place in international politics following the attacks becomes *Atocha*'s core crisis, or anti-crisis as the case may be. After the bombing, Gordon's aloofness as a medicated, self-medicating American *flâneur* clashes with the immediate moral and political activation of his Spanish friends. At first, Gordon's reluctance to chant in the street marches after the bombing can seem a form of post-9/11 cynicism; coming just two-and-a-half years after the 9/11 attacks in the US, the "11-M" Madrid attacks, which killed 191 people, might have seemed to the young American a smaller-scale version of his own country's tragedy, and likely to give way to the same ephemeral unity and subsequent pageantry that followed 9/11 in the American public sphere. His initial experience of media over-saturation, for instance, is a familiar one. The confusion of the attack itself—"I saw, I might have seen, a dazed teenager with blood all over his face" (118)—gives way to the unreality of media representations: "I sat smoking and refreshing the home pages and watching the numbers change. I could feel the newspaper accounts modifying or replacing my memory of what I'd seen; was there a word for that feeling?" (119). But when this furthermore gives way to a vague "excitement" that he, too, might be "contacted by History" in the form of death by a terrorist bomb, which would, he imagines, impress his friends back home, the amorality of the novel seems designed increasingly to press on the reader's sensibilities. Although Gordon simultaneously wonders "why" he could think "dying in a terrorist attack was more bound up with the inexorable logic of History than dying in a car crash or from lung cancer" (150), his ambivalence to Madrid's transformation becomes uncomfortable: for Gordon and for those around him. It becomes especially uncomfortable for the reader, who seems at once prompted to question the political meaning of Gordon's behavior as a representative of American terrorism fatigue and to forgive him for his amorality. As it proceeds, it becomes

increasingly clear that this novel, ultimately, is about *his* year in Spain—his psychological experience rather than what he observes—which just happens to be marked by a public tragedy.

Consider, for instance, the following representative account of one protest, which Gordon attends with his love-interest Teresa, and a competitor for Teresa's affection, Carlos. Notice how Gordon at once reveals his awareness of the moral stakes of what he is witnessing and insists upon the primacy of his own psychological experience:

> Without warning and with improbable volume, Carlos started a chant about Rajoy [Mariano Rajoy, the candidate from the incumbent *Partido Popular* (People's Party) in the election]. He was bellowing, and yet he seemed completely calm. At first he was the only one chanting his chant and I hoped nobody would pick it up, that he would have to abandon it, embarrassed. But then the other people who were near the crowd but not part of it joined Carlos in the chanting. And once the people who were near the crowd were linked by the chant, they moved and we moved with them into the crowd and were absorbed. Then Carlos's chant spread from our part of the crowd forward and grew deafening. Carlos's voice was no longer distinct and I looked at his handsome face and hated it.
>
> Again I retreated and Teresa saw me go and just waved good-bye and I felt annihilated. I tried to smile at her in a manner that doubted her politics, doubted her place in the crowd, but could not…I walked to my apartment and once in my apartment read about the unfolding events of which I'd failed to form a part. The elections were tomorrow. I tried to think about whether a public outrage would cost the PP the elections, about blood on the platform and the makeshift morgue in the convention center near Atocha, but instead I imagined making love with Teresa as if

I were remembering it. Then I imagined her fucking Carlos and felt sure that when I

left they had gone immediately back to her apartment. (130-1)

The passage shows Gordon's acute awareness of his own alienation, moral indifference, and communicative inaction amid the protest. It also illustrates, in candid detail, the nasty psychological fallout of that awareness; his impulsive hatred for Carlos, his attempt to mock Teresa's politics with a skeptical smile, the way his serious contemplation of the election gives way impulsively to jealousy. Amid the drama of the protests, Gordon is far more absorbed with his own romantic and emotional plight rather than with the 11-M tragedy to which Carlos and Teresa seek to respond. More importantly, he knows it, and seeks to explain this detached psychological experience to his reader.

Gordon's frank, almost confessional storytelling mode lends the narrative a final innocence, suggesting that Gordon has acquired some perspective—perhaps even some moral insight—subsequent to, or perhaps as a result of, the experiences described in the world of the novel. But the reader never gets direct access to the specific logic of this apparent affective and intellectual growth. Like other psychologically intimate novels, including *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *The Bell Jar*, the narrative gesture of *Atocha* is at once ambiguous and entirely Gordon's own. Only Gordon would have access to the feelings and experiences described in the book, yet the occasion for their candid review goes unspoken despite Gordon's obvious literary ambitions. Although Lerner himself returned to the US, at the novel's end we have no idea what Gordon's fate will be as he contemplates whether to remain in Spain to teach English and further advance the small notoriety he has made for himself as an expatriate American poet ("with my Ivy League degree, I could certainly find a job teaching English for corporations or rich kids; most Americans in Madrid made a living thus" (162)) or return to the US to attend law school or perhaps "apply to PhD programs in literature" (162). As Gordon wonders about his fate, the ending of the novel *feels* like the conclusion of a report of a spell abroad by one American to his fellow innocents.

Yet a new social catastrophe, which precipitates *Atocha*'s dénouement, again broaches the possibility that Lerner—and perhaps Gordon himself—would like Gordon's experience to stand in for larger questions of American morality and identity. Coerced by his fellowship's administrator to participate in a panel on "literature now" in Spain in the wake of 11-M (161), Gordon embarrasses himself with a new breakdown. At the panel, Gordon, although now fluent in Spanish, unexpectedly loses his composure and fumbles over the names of several Spanish poets: "I heard myself say: 'Ramón Machado Jiménez,' which was as absurd as saying 'Whitman Dickinson Walt'" (177)). Distraught at his mistake, and only able to repeat it and make it worse, the performance elicits skeptical murmurs from the crowd. Although Gordon's friends charitably reassure him that his performance was not as bad as it might have seemed to him, the panel scene prompts the reader once again to question if Gordon's psychological gaffe contains a larger political resonance. But *Atocha* only offers the reader these moral dares in passing glimpses, and without resolution. At the very end of the novel, Gordon and Teresa read some of Gordon's poems on the occasion of a release of a volume of some of his poetry—Gordon is to read in English, and Teresa the translations in Spanish. At the last minute, Gordon decides that his Spanish is passable, and so they switch their roles. The novel subsequently ends with this short paragraph, perhaps the most optimistic in the novel, which refers to the skylit room Gordon has been renting in Madrid: "Teresa would read the originals and I would read the translations and the translations would become the originals as we read. Then I planned to live forever in a skylit room surrounded by my friends" (181). Presumably this implies that some sort of progress has been made, and that Gordon's social standing among his Spanish friends has stabilized, but Lerner provides no specific clues as to Gordon's subsequent fate aside from the vague possibilities he has already entertained, let alone the moral action the writing of any realistic novel—dwelling upon and giving voice to human struggles, however irresolvable and imperfect—inevitably constitutes.

The contract of psychological realism—an ideal rather than an actual genre, which relies upon psychological intimacy as the standard of its success—discards the moral action of its telling in an attempt to bridge James's "greatest breach in nature" between human minds. But insofar as an individual's experience of consciousness is always steeped in its specific circumstances, and is for the most part irrecoverable, this is impossible. Even the most excellent, universally moving psychological novel is at best an extremely rough, failed approximation of the real experience of individual human consciousness. What drops out of solution—what communicates despite the inevitable failure inherent in the form—is actually a moral byproduct, the meaning of which is always dictated and limited by a given text's rhetorical circumstances. By this I mean the real circumstances as well as the imagined circumstances attending the production of a given novel, which often overlap but are never exactly the same. In the case of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner's ambitious attempt to transport the reader into Benjy's world almost completely—and inevitably— fails. Insofar as it succeeds, however, it offers a remarkable and important moral imperative: that even the mentally disabled Compson brother's perspective ought to be taken seriously. *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *The Bell Jar* depend upon a similar unconscious, generic logic. Neither book accurately represents the psychological experience of their respective narrators: that is a far more elusive, enigmatic thing than a novel can capture. To limited extent these novels succeed, however, they convince the reader in spite of their respective, realistic failures that the marginalized, simulated moral pleas of Bob Jones and Esther Greenwood are worth putting down in writing. In short, the moral narrative of the telling of a supposed work of psychological realism precipitates in spite of the form's textual nihilism, and carries the meaning of these novels even as they fail to successfully navigate interpersonal representation.[32] To recall James's take on the impossibility of meaningful

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[32] Psychologically realistic novels, in this way, may actually bear more in common with nineteenth-century works of social realism narrated by omniscient third-parties, such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, than is typically supposed. Both kinds of novels depend upon an impossible authorial perspective and inevitable representational failure to present their

subjective representation, and thus psychological realism, "The border line between objective sense and nonsense is hard to draw; that between subjective sense and nonsense, impossible." Or as the writer who is perhaps the most accomplished contemporary American moral realist, Philip Roth, wonders early in *American Pastoral*,

> You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations…and yet you never fail to get them wrong…You get them wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again…Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do, in a soundproof cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word people are closer to the real thing that the real people that we mangle with our ignorance every day? (35)

Leaving the Atocha Station is an admirable gesture because Lerner's protagonist actively considers moral questions of global political importance inside the world of the novel. James Wood, the esteemed reviewer who wrote *The New Yorker*'s appraisal of the novel, notices *Atocha*'s moral potential as well: "[Gordon's impotence] seems a very American, very privileged kind of impotence, and Lerner, I think, deliberately contrasts Adam's expensive weakness with the fervor and political ardency of the Spanish artists and poets whom he befriends, a fervor that can seem both naïve and courageous alongside Adam's aimless knowingness" (98). But the inertia of psychological realism is so great that the specific, complex moral questions Gordon fleetingly proposes, such as why should "dying in a terrorist attack" be "more bound up with the inexorable logic of History than dying in a car crash or from lung cancer"—a very interesting philosophical question, which asks where terrorism fits into technological and biological history—always begin or lead back to the personal,

basic message, which is that humans are bound to one another despite their almost insurmountable differences on the subtle level of inner life.

psychological crisis the novel mistakenly believes it is simulating. As Wood suggests, this is what makes the book so uncomfortable: "The reader inevitably suspects that this is a confession that consumes itself, rendering the confessor not more knowable but less" (98). This is not Lerner's failure, but a misunderstanding involving the contract of the paradoxical genre in which he is working. It is also an underestimation of the novel's potential as an instrument of realistic, complex moral education. Although Lerner's novel declines the most obvious of these opportunities, they exist, and his writing of the novel—which suggests in spite of itself that *some* limited transcendence of his Madrid solipsism has taken place, which is an inevitably moral, albeit limited act—are their testament. Imagining the contract of that kind of novel, in which Lerner would account for the conditions of Gordon's telling rather that retreat, for conventional reasons, to track the troubled psyche in flux, is one goal of the present study.

Realist literary genres are not technologies, but like technologies their conventions reflect and project cultural assumptions. They can also persist, and to some appear inevitable, even after their cultural utility has waned, like skeuomorphs. As a democratizing force that helped provide literary authority to those who may not come by it naturally, psychological realism is not yet at the end of its historical shelf-life in an American context, where vast social and economic disparities persist and may always persist. Where it disrupts rather than promotes moral reflection, however, its basic, ultimately impossible assumption—that it is possible to render thought in printed language, and that meaningful attempts to do so constitute realism in their success—ought to be reconsidered. As we shall see in Part Two, the means of accomplishing this are not easy to achieve, and most of the writers I roughly classify as incipient moral realists depend upon the conventions of psychological realism as much as they break them. Yet the metafictional dimension I propose as a pathway to moral realism is mainly a final, authorial awareness of the properties already present in most novels, that a long, prose work is a long, prose work whether or not an inscribed narrator

seems to know it. Successful communication in novels is moreover a remarkable public accomplishment, and an exceptionally rare thing.

If he hollers, let him go. If he wishes to leave the Atocha Station behind, by all means let him do it. But should he wish to return to wrestle with the problem in an extended, quasi-philosophical prose work, however limited in his ability to finally capture human experience, that is a moral act—for the imagining author, for the returning character—even when it is not acknowledged as such.

Psychological realism did not cause the myth of writer's block; its dominance is but one expression of the rise of modern psychology as a primary means and set of terms through which we interpret experience, which itself is a response to a rapidly changing, traumatizing modern world. By prioritizing a psychological ideal, however, and supposing that language is a viable vessel for simulating thought, rather than a medium and device of communication, the genre has promoted a realist epistemology where moral difficulty and psychological difficulty are mistaken for one another rather than seen as aspects of the same literary struggle. In the twentieth-century, even as mass marketing and institutions like university creative writing programs routinized the production of fiction, novels frequently forgot that they were novels and presented themselves as secret miracles. Even so, on what Ralph Ellison might have called their "lower frequencies" (581)—which, as James proposed in *Principles,* may be the only frequencies of human communication—they have spoken for us in their basic, moral bravery to track subtle, inner worlds where thinking subjects posses more differences than similarities by a disproportionate ratio. In Part Two, we will pursue a few instances where writers have wrestled with the problem of moral realism to varying degrees of success and failure.

PART TWO

CASE STUDIES IN AMERICAN MORAL REALISM

"You see we make our writers into something very strange" (23).

(A characterization of American authorship by Ernest Hemingway,

in conversation with a German traveler while on safari in Tanzania.

As related by Hemingway in *Green Hills of Africa*.)

I. DISCLOSURES: PROFILING PRODUCTION

This study began self-reflexively, with an assertion that a study on writer's block ought to know how to begin. This was partly a way of claiming authority on the precarious subject of literary production, but also necessary because it is easy to approach the field of block too narrowly or too widely. For similar reasons—confirming authority and explaining why certain topics figure into this study while others do not—shifting from a general history of writer's block to specific histories or case studies in American moral realism warrants additional disclosures about how the present study came into being.

The first aspect of *The Myth of Writer's Block* to clarify at this midpoint concerns the study's macrostructure, specifically the ordering of the two main parts, which could become misleading if left unacknowledged. Beginning with a general cultural and philosophical history was a late decision, and not how this project evolved organically. Part One of this study is actually the *product* of the specific case studies to which we now turn, and not the other way around. *The Myth of Writer's Block* began as separate attempts to reexamine three specific American writers, Joseph Mitchell, Henry Roth, and Ralph Ellison, through questions emerging from specific literary works, biographical and archival materials, and popular and critical representations of various authors rather than in philosophy and American culture at large. Only by considering these authors individually, and then comparatively—a long process determined as much by accident, luck, and archival discovery as by design—did it become possible to see them as part of a larger cultural trend. The specific studies that follow have been heavily revised, and I have recast them in the terminology honed and deployed in Part One. Nevertheless, they should not be read as if they prove or apply a general theory, but rather as the collection of critical experiments that allowed a general theory to become visible. Part Two is the literary historical proving ground in which the theoretical findings of Part One had their origin.

The second disclosure concerns the choice of these three writers as significant cases of writer's block. There are important similarities between Mitchell, Roth, and Ellison, including their respective departures from literary modernism, their shared status as relative outliers from the mainstream of twentieth-century American literature, and their shared impulse to document American moral reality at the expense of sustainability and sometimes coherence. But it is also important to assert that in the genesis of this project, these three writers were chosen from a larger field of supposedly "blocked" writers mainly *for* their diversity. Aside from being male, writing in prose, and living in and writing about New York City as non-natives, they represent the variety of the twentieth-century American canon rather than a unity. The son of North Carolina tobacco family who left the family business to become a writer in New York; a Jewish immigrant from Galicia brought to the US as an infant, who would grow up to document immigrant life on the Lower East Side; a black American named for Ralph Waldo Emerson who grew up in Oklahoma City, who would live up to his namesake in the writing of a twentieth-century classic: in their respective basic life circumstances and in how they came to be writers, Mitchell, Roth, and Ellison could hardly be more different. Their canonical positions, too, are distinct. Mitchell, the least recognizable of the three, is usually treated as an early practitioner of the New Journalism for the innovative profiles and stories he wrote for *The New Yorker* between the late-1930s and 1964. Roth is usually thought of as a modernist novelist for his production in *Call It Sleep* (1934), which was claimed retroactively from oblivion in the 1960s as an early Jewish American classic. Ellison, on the other hand, immediately became famous after the publication of *Invisible Man* (1952), and remains so today, even though that novel has attracted increasing controversy. These three writers are not part of a literary movement, except perhaps in their various rejections of dominant twentieth-century literary trends.

In short, these writers—all of whom have been called blocked, but whose commonalities are otherwise few and relatively subtle—were chosen inductively. Each of the individual studies nevertheless represents a substantial investment of scholarly resources and labor. In the cases of Roth and Ellison, multiple journeys from my Southern California home to distant archives, namely the Center for Jewish History in New York and the Library of Congress in Washington, were required to obtain a full picture of the writers in question. Although Mitchell's unpublished papers and drafts are not available, generating a complete account of Mitchell, who was a subtle reviser, required comparing changes between various versions of published essays as they originally appeared in *The New Yorker* and then later in Mitchell's various collections. Whatever caprice marked my initial selection of Mitchell, Roth, and Ellison, I sought in each case to pick through the rhetoric of popular, critical, and biographical representations in order to establish concrete historical facts in what might be called a *production profile*—a concept that is useful to distinguish the history of a writer's labor from his publication history, how he is portrayed in popular and critical biography, and the public perception of his career, all of which are discursive registers more susceptible to appropriation by block myths—in addition to reading and rereading the various literary texts produced by these authors.

Another disclaimer concerns the internal ordering of Part Two. Although the methodological fracture which marks this dissertation between Part One and Part Two deliberately inverts the order of the study's genesis, within Part Two the order in which I pursued the individual case studies remains intact although they have been substantially revised. Even though Ralph Ellison is by far the most important and recognizable writer I treat in this section, I preserve the order by which I explored these writers and their work because this study would not exist if I had not discovered Mitchell in a graduate course on documentary forms in the fall of 2005. In an unpublished essay I wrote for the course, I treated Mitchell in isolation and with the initial purpose

of exploring the Mitchell legend and claiming him as an underappreciated American realist. A similar project might have been pursued on Roth or Ellison, or for that matter J.D. Salinger, George Oppen, Tillie Olsen, or any writer and poet who has renounced writing, published very little, or otherwise signified in the cultural imaginary as somehow lacking in output. What made Mitchell unique—what brought me to this topic—was the entanglement of Mitchell's reputation with that of another supposedly blocked author, the Greenwich Village eccentric Joe Gould, about whom Mitchell wrote not once but twice, most notably in 1964 in the profile "Joe Gould's Secret," which is taken by many to be Mitchell's signoff from writing (even though he kept an office at *The New Yorker* until his death in the 1990s). Writing about Mitchell, and simultaneously writing about Mitchell writing about Gould, presented a critical problem, which was philosophical as well as practical. Clearly Mitchell identified with Gould on some level, but he also sought to present an accurate Gould to the reading public. To what extent should Gould be read as Mitchell's character, and to what extent should he be read as Mitchell's objective critical subject? The question is a modern version of what in philosophy is called the "Socratic problem"; because the ideas of Socrates are available only through third parties, and mainly through the Platonic dialogues, it is difficult to know what to attribute to whom. This matters because quite like Gould, Socrates mistrusted writing, and strongly preferred oral dialectic as a means of philosophizing.[33] In fact, that preference is the core of one of Socrates's most important arguments, and the distinction that has prompted many modern philosophers to name Socrates as the problematic father of philosophy. Realizing that Gould, too, overloaded the basic literary distinction between *writer* and *character,* it became necessary to rethink Mitchell's gesture in writing about Gould altogether. This was the

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[33] The clearest expression of Socrates's skepticism of writing occurs in the *Phaedrus*. Here is Socrates in conversation with Phaedrus, according to Plato: "Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of a painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing" (166).

context for realizing my fundamental mistake, which was considering Gould to be Mitchell's liability rather than his greatest subject. Reformulated in this way, Mitchell's silence became far less interesting than his achievement, which was at once exploitative and a remarkably devoted, detailed study of Gould. Although Mitchell does not plumb the depths of American morality to the extent of Roth or Ellison, his basic impulse to profile Gould—and dozens of other New Yorkers, mainly from society's underbelly—reflects a morally realistic aesthetic. Mitchell captures the moral peril of befriending Gould (who once warned Mitchell, "[I]f you lie down with dogs, you have to expect to get up with fleas." (*Old Hotel* 681)); but he also expresses openly his awareness of that peril. What matters for literary history is not the risk itself but Mitchell's representation, which constitutes not a vain expression of moral danger—a final holler before a long silence, of the sort simulated in a psychological novel such as Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*—but a brilliant management and transformation of moral danger into literary art. The subsequent silence, if it is related to Gould at all, can only be considered *after* recognizing Mitchell's ability to masterfully contain the problem of Gould in not one but two acclaimed essays: "Professor Sea Gull" (1942) and the much longer "Joe Gould's Secret" (1964).

Encountering Mitchell encountering Gould, and learning to value Mitchell's representation of Gould more than whatever subsequent psychological effect knowing Gould might have had on Mitchell, made this project possible. Mitchell's profile of Gould not only opened the questions of literary reputation this study unpacks, it provided a formal model. Mitchell did not simply bring Gould to life or redeem him, but meticulously documented a historical figure from the modernist period. I sought to do the same thing for Mitchell. When I tried to repeat the gestures with Henry Roth, however, the figure usually considered to be American literature's most profoundly blocked writer, it became apparent that reading Roth's supposed sixty-year silence as a myth—which, of course, it was—did not necessarily explain Roth in any meaningful depth. Exploring Roth's papers,

held by the American Jewish Historical Society, readily revealed that the six decades between the publication of Roth's two novels did not constitute "block," or even necessarily literary silence; Roth actually kept journals during many of the non-publishing years, and was working on his very long, second novel from the 1970s until his death. But Roth's use of his silence as material in his second novel *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, a four-volume, largely autobiographical explanation offered by an imagined, once-blocked Jewish American writer, proved to be far more interesting. Roth's work differs markedly from Mitchell's in terms of what each writer considered literature's domain. Mitchell was rarely autobiographical, while Roth's work is almost entirely based in his own experience. As subtypes of mythically blocked writers, however, they bear a great deal in common as critical problems: Mitchell is a biographical moral realist who supposedly became too close to his nonfictional subjects, while Roth is an autobiographical moral realist whose self-absorption and repressed sexual deviance—Roth had an incestuous affair with his sister in his youth, which he admits through his character in the second volume of *Mercy*—supposedly made writing impossible. In both cases, block myths mistake exceptionally frank representations of morally complex experiences for moral experience itself. For William James, mental blocking was only coincidentally related to whatever additional "fiat" a subsequent imaginative release might contain. In the cases of both Mitchell and Roth, the literary fiats "Joe Gould's Secret" and *Mercy of a Rude Stream* have been mistakenly rewritten into these writers' respective careers *as* the moral peril they actually release. However unconventional these writers careers—however much Mitchell's post-1964 retirement appears to be a mysterious silence, however difficult it is to imagine that six-decades could have passed between a first and second novel—both Mitchell and Roth generated a significant amount of material. Their respective block myths conceal this material far more than they explain anything about these writers.

Ralph Ellison, the subject of the final case study, differs in that he articulated his vision of literature's rhetorical and philosophical purpose much more clearly. This is an essential aspect of the Ellison block myth: after the commercial and critical success of *Invisible Man*, Ellison's publications include mainly critical essays, which he collected in the volumes *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), although he worked actively on a second novel about a racially charged political assassination until his 1994 death. Ellison's turn to critical and philosophical genres has made him an enigma for many twentieth-century respondents, especially in his hostility to dominant twentieth-century literary modes. Of the three authors I explore in these case studies, Ellison's break with modernism was by far the strongest. For him, writing was in the first place a "form of communication" between writer and society ("Society" 242), and American writers—because of unique historical factors including slavery and the experiment of constitutional democracy—had a unique obligation to consider questions of social and political morality. A special disclaimer, then, is required to explain my portrayal of Ellison. If the Ellison case study appears to be defending Ellison against critics who have privileged his formal innovations but mistrusted his message as a theorist of American literature, that is partly because reading Ellison, and exploring the recently opened Ellison papers at the Library of Congress, revealed Ellison as an innovative American literary intellectual operating on the very edge of what his society could support. Ellison is the preeminent American moral realist; in his failure to complete a second novel on the social structures shifting beneath his feet during the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath, he pursues the morally realistic impulse with greater penetration than probably any other twentieth-century American writer.

The question of gender in this study also necessitates a formal acknowledgment. Throughout the composition of *The Myth of Writer's Block*, I have often worried that my focus on heterosexual male authors, especially in the case studies, might represent some latent prejudice. But the fact is the vast majority of writers whom we label "blocked" are male and heterosexual (although as I suggest

in the Mitchell case study, the career of Truman Capote has increasingly been marked by a block myth). Part of the reason for this is simply that block myths only attach themselves to writers whose struggles appear to be outside stereotypical male career narratives, while the myth of the female writer in the twentieth century is, by contrast, largely defined by the struggle of feminist self-representation. Plath's career narrative, for instance, was as uneven and perhaps marked by experiences of Jamesian "blocking" as much as any of the male writers I treat in Part Two. Yet Plath's work has almost always been viewed positively, as a victory over inner-demons and social injustice; through her writing, Plath has usually seemed to transcend rather than explain her suicide. Plath's death underscores the scarcity of her writing, but it has largely enhanced the recognition of her work rather than refiguring it as a moral mistake. As we have seen, moreover, attempts to artificially include female writers—such as Weber's inclusion of Tillie Olsen—can backfire. Leader, also, has a chapter on gender and writer's block, "Blockage and Externality: The Woman as Writer," which occurs at the very end of *Writer's Block*. This chapter, which acknowledges, finally, "the social dimension of writer's block" (232), has the atmosphere of a late attempt to apologize for the absence of women in the volume. Writer's block, in short, is a cultural myth associated with authorial prowess. Changing definitions of literary authorship made possible by a democratized canon and especially new media could—and hopefully will—decrease the myth's prominence in the twenty-first century. Although universally male and heterosexual, I believe the writers in the section represent a diverse array of lived experience and literary achievement, in the cases of Roth and Ellison against extraordinary odds.

Writing on morally fraught subjects is difficult. Experiences of Jamesian "blocking" and "release" are assuredly regular for the writer who seeks to present moral reality (even, as I suggest in this study's Epilogue, for a veritable literary machine such as Philip Roth, perhaps the most prolific American moral realist). But when it comes to the public reputations of writers who once generated

works as accomplished as Mitchell's profiles, Roth's *Call It Sleep*, or Ellison's *Invisible Man*, discussions of writer's block inhabit the realm of myth. None of these writers was monumentally "blocked." On the contrary, each struggled to capture complex moral crises in public documents, and the extent to which we wonder whether they might have been blocked frequently reflects our discomfort with moral crises as readers and critics. Many of the works attempted and published by these writers appear incomplete, overdue, or otherwise rare. The following production profiles resist these labels. These case studies do not attempt to read or interpret silence, but to return to the historical record and to literary texts themselves, which is a more difficult task than it might seem when biographical and critical representations of an author's career are cast in the language of the myth of writer's block. Where a writer appears to have "failed" at a writing task, as in the case of Ellison's second novel, my priority becomes identifying what it means to ask why an accomplished, incisive commentator on American experience has subsequently failed. In many cases, a writer's apparent failure is actually a failure of the realist contract, and thus a question of genre and what American literary culture can imaginatively support. Collectively, these case studies further illustrate block as a myth, but their claims regarding specific writers and specific literary texts are more important than how the cases serve the abstract theory of Part One. Part Two traces the outlines of literary experiments in moral realism, and hints at the possibility of an underappreciated, highly fragmented American literary subgenre. But its claims regarding this possible, incipient genre are modest and situated in the works of specific writers.

On June 10, 1996, *The New Yorker* magazine printed a collaborative "Postscript" memorializing one of its staff writers, New York City's "incomparable chronicler" Joseph Mitchell (78), who had recently died at the age of eighty-seven. Running five pages in length and consisting of retrospective praise by ten of Mitchell's former colleagues, it is difficult to imagine a more flattering tribute to a modern American writer's talent and influence. The obituary honors Mitchell anew for his role as an early innovator of journalistic genres, especially for "raising the feature story—the Profile—to the level of art" decades before writers such as Truman Capote, Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Hunter S. Thompson would cultivate the New Journalism in the 1960s and 1970s (78). According to several of the eulogizers, in fact, there was an aspect of Mitchell's writing approaching literary genius. For instance, Calvin Trillin recalled how Mitchell's writings seemed free of the usual "marks" of literary struggle: "We'd offer theories on how [Mitchell] managed to get the marks of writing off his pieces, so that the words seemed to have materialized on the page through no human effort" (82). This made Mitchell a special model for other journalists, possessed with what Lillian Ross called a "mystical" manner of influence: "When I joined the magazine…I discovered that everybody else here also wanted to write in a way that would be worthy of Joe Mitchell. Nobody ever tried to imitate him, but everybody learned from him. Mystically, he gave us the key to finding our own original ways of working" (82). Or as Janet Malcolm put it, "Joe's feat—which looked so effortless that some reviewers of his books actually condescended to him—was so far beyond what anyone else could do that it inspired no envy; it simply inspired" (83). Although these glowing appraisals might have embarrassed the notoriously modest Mitchell, his former colleagues evidently agreed that his work not only exceeded the high standards of journalistic excellence at the magazine, but that it carried with it some quality defying ordinary explanation.

This will probably come as a surprise to those familiar with Mitchell's reputation as it has taken shape in the years since the writer's death. As the obituary demonstrates, Mitchell was always revered *within* the culture of *The New Yorker* for the "Profile" and "A Reporter at Large" segments he wrote between 1937 and 1964, which he reissued in various collections.[34] Yet today Mitchell is just as famous for his post-1964 non-productivity as he is for the innovation of his published writings, even as *Up in the Old Hotel* (1992), a bestselling omnibus collection Mitchell compiled a few years before his death, remains in print. His conspicuous departure from publication and subsequent three-decade silence is hardly a mirage; notoriously, Mitchell kept an office at *The New Yorker* and remained a fixture at the magazine all the while. Yet fascination with the circumstances surrounding of the end of Mitchell's career has run rampant and disproportionately obscured the writer's specific literary achievements and innovations. Stephen Smith, for instance, calls the end of Mitchell's career to a "morbid" spectacle: "I suppose writers—of all descriptions—have a morbid fascination with it, for the same reason that motorists rubber-neck at pile ups. Perhaps we all have a sense that talent is precious, unbiddable, and that when it departs, or appears to, it's an important loss." (30). And here is Janet Groth, Mitchell's close friend and a former administrative assistant at *The New Yorker,* on the pain of watching Mitchell speak about his writing during the 1970s. The novel on which Mitchell was supposedly working was "a grand subject," Groth writes, but more importantly Mitchell's "cross":

> as the first decade [of working on the project] moved toward a second and as the
>
> notes in the drawers of his desk remained notes and refused to shape themselves into
>
> a manuscript, watching it happen and listening to the note of suppressed panic in
>
> Joe's voice as he tried—and he could only occasionally bring himself to try—to talk

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[34] Mitchell's collections of his New Yorker writings include *McSorely's Wonderful Saloon* (1943), *Old Mr. Flood* (1948), *The Bottom of the Harbor* (1960), *Joe Gould's Secret* (1965), and *Up in the Old Hotel* (1992). He also published *My Ears Are Bent* (1937), a collection of his pre-New Yorker writings. For a complete Mitchell bibliography, see Raymond J. Rundus, *Joseph Mitchell: A Reader's and Writer's Guide* (2003).

about it, I began to catch a glimmer of what it was about his choice of subject that was defeating him. (37-8)

Mitchell was born to a tobacco- and cotton-farming family in North Carolina and came to New York in 1929 to become a reporter, and according to Groth sought to write a novel "weaving into a seamless whole the passing of the old South, symbolized in the death of his father, and the passing of the old port-and-market New York" (37). The problem, in Groth's estimation, "was the difficulty of his trying to write two books into one," as well as resisting a singular narrating consciousness (38). Yet Groth's specific theory that Mitchell may have been trying to write a novel during his supposed silent years, however intriguing, is ultimately of less consequence than the terms of her depiction of Mitchell struggling to discuss his unfinished work.[35] The writer whose "words seemed to have materialized on the page through no human effort" now waits for his draft materials "to shape themselves into a manuscript," and can only speak of writing with a "note of suppressed panic."[36]

Admittedly, the concrete details of Mitchell's actual writing during this period are rather murky, even to those who knew Mitchell at *The New Yorker*, because Mitchell rarely gave interviews and was profoundly reticent on the subject of his process. In a retrospective biographical article, Mark Singer explains that the writer Marie Winn, who was a close friend of Mitchell's, and Sheila McGrath, Mitchell's companion during the last decade and a half of his life, attest he was still producing writing intended for eventual publication. "Mitchell showed them pages from a number of works in progress. Winn believes that some of the material she read was "of a piece" with autobiographical passages that found their way into the *Up in the Old Hotel* preface." Singer goes on to tantalize the reader further on this point:

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[35] More recently, *The New Yorker* supposed that Mitchell had been working on a memoir rather than a novel, from which the magazine published a brief fragment (see Mitchell, Joseph. "Street Life." The New Yorker 11 February 2013. 62-69).
[36] Additionally, the Mitchell legend is almost certainly satirized by Jay McInerney in the popular 1984 novel *Bright Lights, Big City*, which contains a character referred to as "the Ghost" who haunts the offices of the novel's fictional New York magazine and has been "working on an article for seven years" (15).

McGrath, who is the literary executer of Mitchell's estate, sat in my office one day

not long ago and spoke coyly of 'a shopping bag with various sections of stories.'

With Mitchell's consent, she said, she began transcribing these texts and storing them

on a computer disk. 'And that's where they are,' she said. 'I haven't been able to look

at them since he died, so I couldn't say they're publishable where they stand, or with

a little minor editing…' She never completed this sentence. (91)

Needless to say, the selections have not been released. Raymond Rundus claims that Mitchell was

writing an autobiography; in his Mitchell sourcebook, *Joseph Mitchell: A Reader's and Writer's Guide*, he

claims that the title of this document was "A Man Named Me," but this has proved unverifiable.

Groth's reading, too, is highly speculative. What is known is that Mitchell inherited a great deal of

property in North Carolina and began spending additional time there, and that he also became

involved in a wide variety of literary, historical, and civic societies. As Singer explains,

Mitchell had no trouble finding ways to occupy himself that didn't involve sitting in

front of a typewriter. For thirty years, he attended meetings of the James Joyce

Society, at the Gotham Book Mart. He was also a board member of the Gypsy Lore

Society and helped found the South Street Seaport Museum. A backcountry Baptist

who in New York embraced Episcopalianism and modernism, he became a

vestryman of Grace Church…During the eighties, he spent five years as a

commissioner of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Committee…He

walked all over the city, often with binoculars, admiring architecture—he was a

charter member of the Friends of Cast-Iron Architecture—and he lavished special

attention upon ruins. (Singer, 91-2).

In terms of his community involvement, Mitchell by all accounts kept busy during the supposedly

silent years. He was also a prolific collector of antique objects and memorabilia; his collections were

so extensive, in fact, that artist Steve Featherstone, in collaboration with Paul Maliszewski, presented a photography exhibition of his archives at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University in 2008.[37]

Negative portrayals of Mitchell's career as an affair of general decline dwell unnecessarily on the departure of Mitchell's talent. Whereas the responses cited above by Smith and Groth obliquely promote the quality of Mitchell's work (since acknowledging the departure of romantic genius is at the very least a way of affirming its onetime presence), Stanley Tucci's 2000 biopic on Mitchell *Joe Gould's Secret*, by far the most prominent biographical account of Mitchell, paints Mitchell's career as an affair of decline triggered by his work, specifically by Mitchell's supposedly too-intimate literary investment in the subject of his final essay. This essay, which is among Mitchell's longest works, was the second of two *New Yorker* profiles Mitchell wrote on Joe Gould, a usually homeless Greenwich Village eccentric who claimed to be writing the longest unpublished work in the history of the world, which he called "An Oral History of Our Time" or simply "The Oral History." Gould's literary prowess was more performance than reality, a fact Mitchell reveals—or, as I will show, appears to reveal—in the second profile titled "Joe Gould's Secret." But the film presents a version of the Mitchell's life where writing about Gould's supposed literary paralysis triggered a similar experience for Mitchell, proposing that "Joe Gould's Secret" was really a veiled expression of Mitchell's secret reason for abandoning publication.

This myth of contagious writer's block, promoted especially by the film but with its mythic roots in Mitchell's widely perceived silence, has little basis in historical fact. Not only is it based on retrospective projection, one could far more accurately claim the opposite: knowing and writing about Gould didn't haunt Mitchell and destroy him as a writer, but rather constituted Mitchell's best material. Mitchell's revelation of Gould's "secret" was moreover a staged literary performance—a

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[37] For more on Mitchell as a collector, see Maliszewski, Paul, "The Collector." *Granta* 81 (2004): 151-191; and Stephenson, Sam. "The Collector of the Everyday." *Oxford American* 61 (2008): 110-115.

fictional gesture—that takes place entirely in the created world of Mitchell's text. Since the release of the biopic, the myth of Mitchell as a permanently blocked writer has increasingly dominated representations of the writer's career, refiguring his most accomplished and generically innovative work as a scandal and a kind of mistake. In fact the second Gould profile emerges from Mitchell's own attempt to transform historical reality into an engaging story. In this account, I examine how the acceptance of Mitchell's block myth constitutes an evasion of the generic and ethical complexities of Mitchell's work. The process by which it has taken flight, I argue, illustrates how modern generic taxonomies accept the factuality of nonfictional representation, even as works of "literary journalism" and "creative nonfiction" purchase their narrative power, and in some cases their realism, through fictional conventions and structures. As an account of how a work of literature has been popularly misread as history, the story of the complex relationship between Mitchell's work, his authorial myth, and how that myth has shaped his limited critical reception is a cautionary parable in the interpretation of modern authorship and genre.

The myth of Mitchell's nonproduction and the possibility that Gould was a toxic literary subject emerge not from historical reality, but from a misunderstanding of how creative nonfiction relates to accepted factual genres. Creative nonfiction is usually explained as the application of fictional techniques to real world subjects, but the term is as oxymoronic as it is misleading (why insist that a work is a specimen of nonfiction, "not a making," when its differentiating characteristic is its "creative" aspect?). The category does not describe a genre, but rather excuses a diverse array of imaginative works for emulating dominant factual and academic genres—including history, ethnography, literary criticism, and biography—while deliberately bending their formal and ethical principles, including conventions of academic rigor, objectivity, and consensus. Biography is never an absolute science, but it does have standards of objectivity, which Mitchell openly abandons in the biographical sketch "Joe Gould's Secret" even as he remains dedicated to historical accuracy.

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Mitchell's long essay on Gould is not simply biography dressed up with extra "creative" flair. Rather it is a fundamentally creative work, a fiction that deviously emulates biography as a factual genre while boldly discarding the pretense of biographical objectivity in order to generate readerly interest. "Joe Gould's Secret" has been misread as a work of armchair biographical science, a transcript of a harrowing intellectual experience that mysteriously ended an acclaimed writer's career. Like a quality biography, the book is meticulously researched, but more importantly it is shaped to present a controlled fictional experience. Mitchell's revelation of Gould's secret is not a confession, but a literary performance. Through Mitchell's simultaneous commitment to biographical accuracy and his insistence on the ultimate subjectivity of his attempt to represent the experience of another human being, the essay "Joe Gould's Secret" becomes a deceptive work of what might be called—against postwar conceptions of the novel as the preeminent reflective, autobiographical genre—*biographical fiction*, a biographical novella, and Mitchell an organic innovator of a realist fictional form.

Tucci's *Joe Gould's Secret* and the Mitchell Block Myth

Perhaps counterintuitively, the most efficient way to map the differences between the myth and reality of Joseph Mitchell and his work is by picking through the various distortions of Tucci's melodramatic biopic *Joe Gould's Secret*. This film represents an extreme case of the Mitchell block myth, but what it believes it can get away with—what might be called its representational contract—illustrates the general myth's basic terms. Adapted from a screenplay by Howard A. Rodman, the film is based on, but significantly departs from, both of Mitchell's *The New Yorker* profiles on Gould ("Professor Sea Gull" (1942) and "Joe Gould's Secret" (1964)). Tucci plays Mitchell in the film, and Gould is portrayed by Ian Holm. The film tracks, or alleges to track, the slice of history during which Mitchell initially pursued Gould as the subject of a profile, and the subsequent fallout of the

publication of this article ("Professor Sea Gull") when Gould, eager to sustain his unexpected rise to fame, became an increasing social and, according to the film, intellectual burden on Mitchell.

As the film teases out, and as it is well known, Gould's actual literary production hardly amounted to what he claimed. As Tucci's Mitchell progressively acknowledges over the course of the film, there was no "Oral History," at least not as Gould described it. There were repetitive journal writings in composition books, eleven of which, located after Gould's death, are now available to researchers in New York University's Fales Library (Hutchinson and Miller), as well as the composition books Mitchell attests to reading containing multiple re-writings of essays on topics related to Gould's own family history and early life experiences (*Old Hotel* 663). But the ever growing manuscript Gould claimed to be storing with various friends and acquaintances around New York and the surrounding area, which according to Gould in 1942 amounted to nine-million words (*Old Hotel* 57), has never been found. As the film suggests, Gould's ability to live off his reputation as the potential author of the "Oral History" in New York was thus all the more remarkable. At one point, as the film depicts accurately, Gould even attracted an anonymous patron who provided him with room and board, and he always had the sympathy of prominent writers, intellectuals, and artists including, according to Mitchell in his two profiles, Malcolm Cowley, E.E. Cummings, Erika Feist, Horace Gregory, Alice Neel, Ezra Pound, William Saroyan, and Aaron Siskind. Although the mystery of writerly paralysis is captured poignantly in a fictional rendering of Mitchell's last visit with Gould at Pilgrim State Mental Hospital just before Gould's death, for the most part the "secret" of the film's title could easily refer not to the supposed cause of Gould's silence, but to the other possibility of the pun, to Gould's extraordinary ability to sustain an authorial persona despite writing very little. In this sense the film defends Gould, and its argument regarding Gould becomes a subtle critique of the materialist preoccupations of modernist literary culture. As a well-known cultural figure, the film seems to say, Gould may have disrupted standards of authorial legitimacy for a

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literary milieu where the production of a book was the *sine qua non* of professional arrival. But the fascination he received from the literary world also proved the persistent capacity of conventions of oral storytelling and performance to signify and capture essential aspects of human experience, even amid a community of readers, writers, and publishers whose standard of achievement lay in the printed word.

To give literary credit where it is due, it should be noted that Gould left a legible mark on the overlapping archives of twentieth-century American literature and transatlantic modernism. Over a decade before he even met Mitchell, Gould published a series of short, Emersonian theme essays in various *avant-garde* journals of the 1920s and 1930s, including "Art" in *The Exile*, "Social Position" in *Broom*, "Marriage" and "Civilization" in *The Dial*, and "Insanity" and "Freedom" in *Pagany* (*Old Hotel* 659-60). However fated these essays were to become high-cultural detritus, it is worth noting that Gould was published in one of the final issues of *The Dial* (April 1929), where his work entered the pages of the same "little" magazine that published "The Waste Land." The most realistic barometer of Gould's literary impact, however, is not the matter of how much Gould wrote with which the critical establishment should be concerned, but that he was taken seriously as an emergent writer and as a cause by some of the most important literary figures of his time before Joseph Mitchell's initial 1942 profile accelerated Gould's colloquial fame. Notably, E.E. Cummings devoted a poem to Gould in the 1935 collection *No Thanks* ("#27"), which suggests, as J.D. Shuchter noted in 1966,[38] early respondents hardly fell for his claims about the Oral History and rather understood Gould and his ambitious project as an interesting but ultimately benign cultural and philosophical problem. Here are the significant final stanzas of the Cummings poem:

> and a myth is as good as a smile but little joe gould's quote oral
>
> history unquote might(publishers note)be entitled a wraith's

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[38] See Shuchter, J.D. "E.E. Cummings and Joe Gould's 'Oral History.'" *American Notes and Queries* 4.10 (1966): 148-9. Print.

> progress or mainly awash while chiefly submerged or an amoral
>
> morality sort-of-aliveing by innumerable kind-of-deaths
>
>
> (*Amérique Je T'Aime* and it may be fun to be fooled
>
> but it's more fun to be more to be fun to be little joe gould). (*Collected Poems* 441)

The poem is playful, but Cummings has no illusions about Gould. Through a series of alternate titles

for the Oral History ("a wraith's progress," "mainly awash while chiefly submerged," "an amoral

morality sort-of-aliveing by innumerable kind-of-deaths"), Cummings indicates his awareness of the

inherently contradictory nature of Gould's project. He also speculates that whatever measure of

"fun" Gould offers to those who participate in his "myth" must be exceeded by the fun Gould had

in projecting it. Gould is, for Cummings, a deceptive persona, and his appeal may be measurable in

the coin of "fun," but his deceptions and contradictions are also worth thinking seriously about—

and, apparently, writing a poem about—because they bear on the assumptions of modernist literary

culture, where Gould really would appeal to serious publishers, including Charles A. Pearce of the

firm Duell, Sloan, and Pearce who was, according to Mitchell, eager to release a volume of selections

from the Oral History (*Old Hotel* 684-7).

Ezra Pound would go further than Cummings in his assessment of Gould in an essay titled

"Dr. Williams' Position," which appears in the 1937 collection *Polite Essays*. In an ambitious

argument foreshadowing the nationalist controversies that would mark Pound's career with

increasing frequency during and after World War Two, Pound cites Gould alongside William Carlos

Williams as one of two authors who shared an unalienable native core that might offer American

literature a "distinct" future. He suggests Williams and Gould should be taken together as models

for a new American literary nationalism: "We must breed a non-Mabie, non-Howells type of author.

And of the possible types Williams and Gould serve as our best examples—as distinct from the

porous types" (73). Gould moreover features frequently in the correspondence of Pound and Cummings; he is mentioned on twenty-four occasions, under a variety of nicknames including, in an early letter from Cummings to Pound, "Sir Oral" for his Oral History (*Letters* 18). While it is clear from this correspondence that Pound and Cummings did not take Gould entirely seriously, they, like Mitchell, imagined him to be a fascinating problem for modernist literary culture. For Cummings, Gould was a limit case for what modernism could support. To accept him was necessary in order to accept other formal and philosophical experiments that deliberately subverted intelligibility: "the question Is Joe Gould Crazy strikes me as, putting it very mildly, irrelevant. For 'crazy' implies either (crazy)or(not) [*sic*]" (*Letters* 226)).[39] For Pound, he represented the possibility of the "unreceived and uncomprehended native hickory" ("Dr. Williams" 69).

But Joe Gould's "secret"—whether we take the pun of the film's title to refer to Gould's hard to define appeal, or to whatever paralyzing problem Gould might have suffered from as a writer—is not, ultimately, the secret of the film *Joe Gould's Secret*. Rather, it is the impact the experience of knowing Gould supposedly had on the highly productive Mitchell. As the film proceeds, as Mitchell becomes increasingly frustrated with Gould and closer to finally outing him as a hack, the film makes a point to show the seemingly stable *New Yorker* columnist facing a mounting psychological crisis of his own. In one scene, the character based on storied *New Yorker* editor Harold Ross witnesses Mitchell with tears in his eyes in the magazine offices because he is "sad" to have finished a writing project (according to Norman Sims, the conversation really occurred, but the tears are the film's addition).[40] Through this and other fleeting phenomena in the film, where Tucci

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[39] Oddly, although Cummings was clearly aware that the Oral History was at least in part a fabrication in the *No Thanks* poem, he seems to have forgotten this in his later years. In Cummings's final letter to Pound, shortly before the former's death in 1962, he expressed surprise that the document was never found. He describes thinking recently of "JosephFerdinandGould—who may have died a decade ago, but nobody's ever been able to find his Oral History Of The World; which(in the form of numberless notebooks)he toted hither&yon during halfacentury:& was rumored to have occasionally parked large portions thereof at sundry Bowery flophouses [sic]" (*Letters* 412).
[40] The passage occurs in a 1990 essay by Norman Sims based on a 1989 interview with Mitchell: "Mitchell said Harold Ross, the founder of *The New Yorker*, came into his office one time to discuss the characters in Mitchell's articles. 'You

subtly portrays Mitchell's identification with a version of his own struggle as a professional writer in Gould's professional struggle, the viewer is prompted to suppose that Gould's inability to write the Oral History might have resonated with some mounting crisis of production for Mitchell.

The film waits to reveal the full extent of this hypothetical creative crisis until the very end, when it at last advances openly the possibility that Mitchell, at the end of his career, may have seen and identified profoundly with an aspect of his own writerly insecurity in Gould. Following a lingering final shot where Mitchell enters the backseat of a car and then, portentously, disappears with the car down a Manhattan side street behind a featureless brick wall, white text scrolls slowly across a black screen to confirm the viewer's suspicion just before the credits. "In 1964," it reads, "Joseph Mitchell published 'Joe Gould's Secret' in which he finally revealed that Gould's Oral History did not exist. For the next 32 years of his life Mitchell went to his New Yorker office every day…but 'Joe Gould's Secret' would be the last piece he would ever write" (ellipses original). This final move is a deployment of a convention of biographical and "true-story" filmmaking, where, once a compelling slice of history has been represented cinematically, the rest of the story must be provided efficiently through a few lines of text to gratify audience curiosity (similar final moves, which allude to an author's subsequent "silence," occur in other recent literary biopics, including *Sylvia*, the 2003 film on Sylvia Plath, and more proximately the acclaimed *Capote* (2005)). Through the film's mounting argument about the potential resonance of Gould's experience as a writer with the experience of Mitchell, and through its confirmation of this argument in the eleventh hour with these final lines, it offers nevertheless a revealing provocation: in a literary culture where silence and failure are more common than success, and far more likely than prolific literary production, and where writerly authority is distributed unequally and according to the capricious logic of the literary

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know,' Ross said, 'you're a pretty gloomy guy.' A moment later, Ross amplified this remark. 'Of course,' he continued, 'I'm no Goddamned little ray of sunshine myself'" (88). The dialogue is replicated to create a memorable moment in the film, but the tears do not occur in Sims's rendition.

marketplace, perhaps writer's block can be contagious and transmitted by means of some insidious subconscious process.

The possibility is undeniably an intriguing one, and the idea that Mitchell's post-1964 productivity may have been an affair of "block," acquired from Gould or some other source, has been expressed widely, albeit nowhere so blatantly as in the film. Clever, original thinkers and writers like Gould who fail to generate publishable, coherent works, however eccentric their lifestyles, suggest not only the ephemerality of "talent," a term notoriously difficult to quantify or prove and which may suddenly depart and never return. Silently and synecdochically, they signify the potential irrelevance of all literary labor against the background of the practical difficulty of producing work that will at once conform to the tastes of a fickle reading public and please a pitiless critical establishment (not to mention broader backgrounds including the general logic of capital, where literary and intellectual work can seem surplus labor if not a subversion of the social order, as well as the background of the unknowable infinite, where the work of even the most productive and influential writer may be superfluous). As Stanley Edgar Hyman put it at the end of his 1965 essay on Mitchell's career, "Joe Gould's secret, which is the burden of Joseph Mitchell's powerful art, is ultimately the secret of our brief, lonely existence on a disinterested planet" (85). A writer may have his human admirers, such cases seem to announce, but against the backgrounds of market irrelevance and probable cosmic indifference no text can have any real or lasting meaning.

The possibility that the anxiety of irrelevance may give way to writerly ambivalence, and subsequently leap from writer to writer, is also not without precedent in twentieth-century American literature, where Mitchell and especially Gould are both marginal figures. But considering Mitchell as silenced by Gould retroactively revises how he was considered in his own time. More importantly, it revises how Mitchell was taken by the few critics who have approached him through his work. For instance, the most detailed critical account of Joseph Mitchell's writings, Noel Perrin's "Paragon of

Reporters: Joseph Mitchell" (1983), never touches on the possibility that Mitchell became a blocked writer because of Gould, or, for that matter, for any other reason. Almost two decades of nonpublication from a writer who kept an office at *The New Yorker* all the while should have been ample time for Mitchell's publication silence to register in the critical imagination as a possible affair of block, paralysis, or willing departure from publication, as ample as the twenty-eight years between the essay "Joe Gould's Secret" and the 1992 release *Up in the Old Hotel*, when such speculations ran rampant in reviews and other responses to the omnibus collection. But in 1983, a full nineteen years after "Joe Gould's Secret," Perrin was still more interested in tracing the trajectory of Mitchell's career according to a figure of his own invention than trying to explain, to use Smith's term, the "mystery" of Mitchell's "silent typewriter." For Perrin, in fact, Mitchell's career, at least as it can be traced across Mitchell's five collections as of 1965, is exactly the opposite of the affair of decline proposed by the film *Joe Gould's Secret*. "To some extent," Perrin writes, "Mitchell's oeuvre resembles a set of Chinese boxes, with the smallest coming first" (173). In 1983 Perrin still perceived Mitchell's literary star to be rising, not falling. The spans between the publication of Mitchell's collections were long, Perrin notes, and Mitchell's output of articles diminished since the days of his early labors in the thirties writing "three newspaper pieces a day" for the *New York World,* the *Herald-Tribune*, and the *World-Telegram*, before moving finally to *The New Yorker* (178). But he interprets this to be a response to the increasing sophistication and complexity of Mitchell's material. For example, regarding Mitchell's collection *The Bottom of the Harbor*, Perrin writes,

> [Mitchell's] best—his best book altogether, I think—is *The Bottom of the Harbor*, which came out in 1960. This means it took him twelve years to write it, and that, too, is part of a pattern. In his early days he was writing three newspaper pieces a day. Now it has taken twelve years to write six essays. They are far longer than the early stuff, to be sure—they average about twelve thousand words—but mainly they are much

more complex, and they involve something like total knowledge of New York as a

seaport, past and present. (178-9)

Evaluating Mitchell through his work rather than his biography, Perrin reads the twelve years

between *Old Mr. Flood* and *The Bottom of the Harbor* as evidence of Mitchell's increasing care as a

writer, not a symptom of whatever paralytic intellectual disease Mitchell might have been picking up

from Gould. For Perrin, time taken to write explains high quality work, and it reflects moreover the

"total knowledge" Mitchell displays in the essays of *The Bottom of the Harbor*. Perrin also expresses, at

the end of his essay, unqualified optimism for Mitchell's future creative endeavors: "And I can

continue to hope for the new book upon which he is working" (184). In Perrin's perception,

Mitchell *took* his time, rather than struggled through it or squandered it, especially when it came to

deciding how and when to rerelease his essays in book form.[41] Joseph Mitchell's "secret" is, for

Perrin, not the explanation for his post-1964 silence, but his increasing patience and dedication as a

writer and researcher throughout the latter years of his career.

In contrast, the film *Joe Gould's Secret* advances its final argument about Mitchell's work, and

the danger of taking on Gould as a subject, by distorting the timeframe of the actual, historical

encounter between Mitchell and Gould. In fact it does so through a set of specific chronological

compressions and modifications, many of which cannot be fully explained as cinematic convention

or reasonable biographical speculation, especially when decontextualized from the innocence the

film projects as a function of its attempt to elegize Mitchell, Gould, and their New York. Taken

alongside the film's end gesture, these changes substantially reshape the final meaning of the

Mitchell-Gould encounter. Consider, for instance, what happens when one attempts to map a

skeletal outline of the events of the Mitchell-Gould exchange, as they are represented by *both* the

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[41] In *The New Yorker*'s obituary of Mitchell, David Remnick offers a similar perspective on the "rhythm" of Mitchell's prose: "To achieve that deceptively simple rhythm took great attention and, increasingly, great periods of time. A Profile might take him months or years; it took as long as it took" (78).

film and by Mitchell's own account of the experience in the essay from which the film extracts much of its dialogue and its title:

1) Mitchell first becomes aware of Gould as a Greenwich Village personality (Winter 1932) (*Old Hotel* 631).

2) Mitchell first interacts with Gould out of interest in writing a profile piece on him, based on his reputation and on that of the "Oral History" (Summer and Fall 1942) (633-676).

3) *The New Yorker* publishes Mitchell's first Gould profile, "Professor Sea Gull." (December 12, 1942) (676).

4) Mitchell arranges a meeting between Gould and Charles A. Pearce, of the publishing house Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, hoping that Gould will allow the editor to read part of his extremely long work in progress and perhaps publish it. After Gould resists the courtesy, Mitchell accuses him outright of fabricating the Oral History. (September 3, 1943, 3:20 PM). Their friendship subsequently wanes. (686, 688, 696).

5) Joe Gould dies (August 18, 1957, "around eleven o'clock") (714).

6) *The New Yorker* publishes "Joe Gould's Secret," where Mitchell reveals publicly his suspicions about Gould and the Oral History. It is Mitchell's last original published work (September 19 and 26, 1964).

To viably represent these events as they occur in both the essay and the film it is necessary to list them by number because, although they take place in the film in historical order, the passage of time is variably compressed and dilated in the film. No doubt this was done in part to amplify narrative coherence—this was, after all, a film produced at considerable expense and under an obligation to speak to as wide a paying audience as possible—but it is not simply cinematic convention, as it serves the purpose of dramatizing the final meaning of the exchange as a possible affair of contagious writer's block. For example, the film represents the distance between Events 1 and 2 as a

matter of mere days. In reality they took place over the course of a decade, a distortion that

obscures, among many minor historical details, the impulsiveness of Mitchell's choice of Gould as a

profile subject, which was, in the first place, a quest for fresh, interesting literary material ("One

morning in the summer of 1942, sitting in my office at *The New Yorker*, I thought of Gould—I had

seen him on the street the night before—and it occurred to me that he might be a good subject for a

Profile [sic]" (*Old Hotel* 633)). More deceptively, the film all but discards the temporal distance

between Events 5 and 6. Whereas Mitchell had seven years to stew over the final meaning of his

long friendship with Gould after Gould's death, the film, by citing a version of the final lines of *Joe

Gould's Secret* in a voiceover as Mitchell disappears in a car, implies a causal, temporally proximate

relationship between the events of the film and the production of Mitchell's supposed sign-off essay.

A voiceover preceding the scene announces briefly that Joe Gould died in 1957, more than a decade

has passed since the narrative present of the film, which occurs during World War Two (the film

makes this explicit; midway through the film, Gould claims that he is hiding his Oral History on a

duck and chicken farm on Long Island to product it from potential bombing). Yet neither Mitchell

nor his young daughter, who circles around the car in the final scene, has aged whatsoever at the

film's end. Temporal distortion and the reconfiguration of historical reality are conventional

practices of biographical film, and of historical and documentary film generally, and these techniques

are hardly unique to *Joe Gould's Secret*. But the scale of distortion observable in this film is extreme,

and especially deceptive because it is about a set of events that are also significantly shaped by the

literary text that is their source. Through the temporal twists and compressions of *Joe Gould's Secret,*

Tucci and his collaborators suggest that Mitchell's literary interest in Gould was a kind of mistake,

which they present under the sign—the very title—of an innovative work of historical, biographical

fiction.

Profound creative crises obviously take place, and they can sometimes follow subtle processes of subconscious identification between writer and subject. But when representations of such crises diagnose diverse phenomena under the banners block, silence, or paralysis—all of which are imprecise metaphors for intellectual and imaginative collapse—and when such representations are publicly accepted, specific literary and moral problems are reassigned to the myth of the writer in psychological crisis. The film *Joe Gould's Secret* is an extreme example of this phenomenon. The film reproduces Mitchell's gesture, along the lines of Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2000) or Michael Winterbottom's *Tristram Shandy: A Cock and Bull Story* (2005), two films which seek to extend the aesthetic problems of the literary texts from which they depart. Schematically speaking, the Tucci film's biographical fictionalization of Mitchell's experience does perhaps repeat Mitchell's biographical fiction on Gould, effectively transforming Mitchell into a character just as Mitchell transformed Gould into a character. While *Adaptation* and *Tristram Shandy* openly express their respective processes of cinematic adaptation, however, *Joe Gould's Secret* conceals Mitchell's text, from which it nevertheless gleans its story and title. Mitchell's literary innovation is thus obscured, including his simultaneous devotion to historical accuracy and fictional creativity.

Mitchell's last published piece was about a writer who lied about the nature and scale of his work, but this is a historical coincidence. The fictionality of "Joe Gould's Secret" actually suggests that Mitchell neutralized whatever personal writerly anxiety he might have sought to express through his depiction of Gould. To read the work as Mitchell's sign off from writing is to misidentify the fictional voice of "Joe Gould's Secret," which is a creative projection as well as a historical authority. "Joe Gould's Secret" is a work of biographical fiction, where Mitchell—whether or not he identified with Gould—*also* goes to great lengths to effectively render Gould, a real human being, as a literary character. Mitchell assuredly exploits Gould as his material, but he does not mythologize him any more than Gould sought to be mythologized. Mitchell's act is benign compared to the gesture of the

Tucci film, which conceals its source texts, romanticizes Mitchell as a tormented writer, and promotes a myth of literary decline. Tucci's film, and the cultural myth of contagious block of which it is an extreme case, evades Mitchell's fortitude as an innovative writer of moralist, historical realism.

<center>"Joe Gould's Secret" as Realism</center>

The literary biopic *Joe Gould's Secret* "tells" the following secret: *Joseph Mitchell caught his writer's block from an encounter with the non-writing writer Joe Gould.* The book *Joe Gould's Secret,* by contrast, both tells and conceals a different secret: even though there was a pivotal moment when Mitchell realized Gould's Oral History did not exist, Mitchell assumed this all along, expressed it frequently, and readably wrestled as a literary artist with how to create for the reader an authentic experience with Gould in all of his deceptive contradictions. Mitchell did not collapse in response to the experience of writing about a monumentally blocked writer. On the contrary, he cleverly effaced himself in his various representations of Gould. Against the myth but in full view of it, let us approach Mitchell's two profiles of Gould on their own fictional terms, as well as through the revisions and editorial decisions Mitchell performed when compiling and recompiling both profiles in his various collections.

There can be no better place to begin than the ending of the essay "Joe Gould's Secret." According to the argument presented by the film, covertly and then candidly in the postscript preceding the credits, the final lines of this essay constitute Mitchell's sign-off from writing and the beginning of a period of silence or block. Although there is, as we have seen, some evidence Mitchell was writing something new during this period, a version of literary history might be written to support this hypothesis: with the exception of the introduction to *Up in the Old Hotel,* Mitchell simply did not publish any significant new writing after 1964 aside from revisions to existing works.

<center>128</center>

But regardless of whether or not Mitchell experienced some kind of intellectual collapse that limited his ability to finish new writing or diminished his willingness to publish, what literally marks the final lines of Mitchell's essay, which are not simply the final printed lines of his *New Yorker* career but the final lines of two books—the 1965 volume *Joe Gould's Secret* and the 1992 volume *Up in the Old Hotel*—is something much more complex than the transference of literary paralysis from Gould to Mitchell, and more complex *because* it is literary, that is to say constituted by a deliberate act of writing and positioned strategically at the very end of not one but two published works.[42]

Observe Mitchell's simultaneous participation and non-participation, at the end of his essay, in the propagation of the myth of Gould as author of the Oral History. The passage arrives after Mitchell relates an occasion when he learned how, upon his death, Gould piqued the interest of serious literary personalities one last time. Gould's "old, old friend" Edward Gottlieb (*Old Hotel* 713), editor of the newspaper *The Long Island Press*, apparently believed so unquestioningly in the existence of the Oral History that he formed a "committee" to search for the work and hopefully publish it. When asked to be a member, Mitchell explains, he acquiesced despite his knowledge regarding Gould, resolving not to tell Gould's secret then because of decorum. Although he "could save [Gottlieb] and his committee quite a wild-good chase," he writes, "one of the few things I have learned going through life is that there is a time and a place for everything, and I didn't think that this was the time or the place to be telling one of Joe Gould's oldest friends that I didn't believe the Oral History existed" (715). In fact he waited for the occasion of this essay, seven years later, to openly address that possibility, which is a point on which Mitchell insists in the essay's final lines, supposedly the final lines of his career:

> Let them go ahead and look for the Oral History, I thought. After all, I thought, I

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[42] In this section, care has been taken to distinguish between the original and final versions of Mitchell's essay "Professor Sea Gull." Because there are no significant differences between the original and final versions of the essay "Joe Gould's Secret" that bear on this study, however, all references to that essay refer to the version that occurs in the widely available *Up in the Old Hotel*.

could be wrong. Hell, I thought—and the thought made me smile—maybe they'll find it.

Gottlieb repeated his question, this time a little impatiently. "You will be on the committee, won't you?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, continuing to play the role I had stepped into the afternoon I discovered that the Oral History did not exist—a role that I am only now stepping out of. "Of course I will." (716)

Because Mitchell appears in this passage to admit, finally, his "role" in the Joe Gould myth, one might be inclined to take him at his word, to suppose that the 1964 writing of the essay "Joe Gould's Secret" marks the first "now" when Mitchell would reveal the fiction of Joe Gould as author of the Oral History. But the move actually reflects less on the future of Mitchell's career than it does on its past. What is most curious about the end of "Joe Gould's Secret" is the timeline of revelation it presents, which does not accurately represent the history Mitchell has just provided of his multi-decade encounter with Gould. The most dramatic moment of the essay may indeed by "the afternoon" asserted as the moment when the Oral History was "discovered," but there is more than enough evidence present in the essay to prove that Mitchell had suspicions about Gould long before "Friday afternoon, September 3, 1943, around three o'clock" when he accused Gould of misrepresenting himself (686-8). Rather than a moment of realization, that moment in 1943 was merely when Mitchell attempted to introduce Gould to a publisher and subsequently "discovered" him in the second, archaic sense, when Mitchell confronted Gould and accused him of misrepresenting the Oral History (a moment to which we only have access, not incidentally, though Mitchell's account of the experience).

Long before that September afternoon, for example, there was Mitchell's December 1942 meeting with Gould in the weeks following the publication of "Professor Sea Gull." Mitchell

explains how he provoked Gould's anger by noting Gould's obsessive impulse to revise the completed chapters of the Oral History instead of moving on to new material. Following a heated explanation by Gould about the value of "quality" over "quantity" in writing, Mitchell offers the following gloss for his 1964 reader of his opinion on the matter: "The thought crossed my mind that this was an odd way for the author of a book as huge and formless and shapeless as the Oral History to be talking" (*Old Hotel* 680). It is indeed "odd" and revealing, but perhaps no more so than Mitchell's representation of the experience, which conflicts strongly with his claim to have discovered the truth about the Oral History in a flash ten months later. Reaching even further back into the history of their interaction, there is also Mitchell's explanation of how he nearly abandoned his initial research on Gould for "Professor Sea Gull" itself when Gould offered nothing but excuses for why he could not produce the core, oral transcript chapters of the Oral History, and why he only had a few, repetitive essay chapters:

> I was growing leery of Gould; I had begun to feel that, whatever the reason, he really didn't want me to see the oral part of the Oral History, and that when the woman returned [a friend of Gould's who allegedly held some of the volumes], some brand-new difficulty might very well present itself. I decided on the spur of the moment that the best thing to do was to abandon the project right then and there and go on as quickly as possible to something else. (669)

Clearly a passage such as this one contradicts the image Mitchell offers of himself at the end of "Joe Gould's Secret," the blind follower of Gould's myth he portrays himself to be up until the moment when he "discovered" the truth about Gould and embraced his "role" in the fiction.

Skeptical tones are also easily detectable in "Professor Sea Gull," the very essay that advanced Gould's fame and helped earn him a patron. In a description of Gould's attempts to publish the Oral History in the earlier essay, Mitchell writes,

At one time or another he has lugged armfuls of it into fourteen publishing offices. "Half of them said it was obscene and outrageous and to get it out of there as quick as I could," he says, "and the others said they couldn't read my handwriting." Experiences of this nature do not dismay Gould; he keeps telling himself that it is posterity he is writing for, anyway. (*Old Hotel* 57)

In this passage and throughout the essay, Mitchell writes in declarative, present tense sentences, the narrative mode typical to his profiles and other sketches before the retrospective "Joe Gould's Secret," which is written in the past tense. This mode allows him to achieve the profile's generic purpose of bringing an individual to life as effectively as possible for the reader. To take Mitchell's analysis of the effect of the experience of "lugged armfuls" on Gould at face value and as literal truth, instead of as knowing participation intended to generate an ironic effect, is to miss both the pleasure of the portrait and its intent. The meaning of "Professor Sea Gull" is contained in the contrast between Mitchell's seeming present-tense faith in Gould's claims and their obvious absurdity, which all along manifests in the skeptical mode of Mitchell's analysis—"Experiences of this nature do not dismay Gould"—and which obtains its traction, its comedy, and its empathy through its appeal for the reader's willing suspension of disbelief, not in the reader's belief in Mitchell's naïveté.

And here is Mitchell, again in the original 1942 essay, on the experience of reading the Oral History as it was expressed by others acquainted with Gould: "Only a few of the hundreds of people who know Gould have read any of the Oral History, and most of them take it for granted that it is gibberish. Those who make the attempt usually bog down after a couple of chapters and give up. Gould says he can count on one hand or on one foot those who have read enough of it to be qualified to form an opinion" (60). In this passage, Mitchell openly expresses that few people actually took Gould's writing seriously, and defers to Gould to provide a means for interpreting their

perspective. The burden of who is responsible for keeping Joe Gould's "secret" thus lies significantly on the reader even in the context of "Professor Sea Gull."

The most instructive of Mitchell's repeated efforts to transform the experience of Joe Gould the person into a literary experience, however, are the revisions Mitchell made to the original 1942 magazine version of "Professor Sea Gull" when he combined it with the essay "Joe Gould's Secret" to form the volume *Joe Gould's Secret* in 1965. Mitchell might have left "Professor Sea Gull" out of this book. "Joe Gould's Secret" is an autonomous work, and bulky enough to have supported its own book-length volume. By including "Professor Sea Gull" as a kind of foil to the later essay, Mitchell provides the reader of *Joe Gould's Secret* an encounter with the Joe Gould of the present tense essay which presented him as a living figure to 1940s New York City. This heightens the drama of Mitchell's subsequent posthumous revelations. As Perrin observes, some of the revisions to the 1965 version merely indicate Mitchell's attention to detail: "It is typical of Mitchell's great concern for accuracy that the eighth sentence has been changed from 'He [Gould] is five feet four and he hardly ever weighs more than ninety-five pounds' to 'He is five feet four and he hardly ever weighs more than a hundred pounds'" (183). But there are two significant revisions to the final *Joe Gould's Secret* version of the "Professor Sea Gull" profile that serve specific rhetorical purposes; two lines Mitchell removed from the 1965 revision which deal with Gould's mental health.

Although the passages function differently, they are linked. The first occurs at the end of one of the paragraphs where Mitchell describes the Oral History and Gould's method as a writer. Here is the passage as it occurs in the original 1942 "Professor Sea Gull":

> Here and there [in the Oral History] are rambling essays on such subjects as the
> flophouse flea, spaghetti, the zipper as a sign of the decay of civilization, false teeth,
> insanity, the jury system, remorse, cafeteria cooking, and the emasculating effect of
> the typewriter on literature. "William Shakespeare didn't sit around pecking on a

dirty, damned, ninety-five-dollar doohickey," he wrote, "and Joe Gould doesn't, either." *In his essay on insanity, he wrote, "I suffer a mild form of insanity. I have delusions of grandeur. I believe myself to be Joe Gould."*

> The Oral History is almost as discursive as "Tristram Shandy." ("Professor" 31, italics mine)

The ending of this paragraph, and Mitchell's transition to a description of the general character of the Oral History in the next paragraph with the comparison to *Tristram Shandy*, are exactly the same in the 1965 version except for the citation of Gould's claim to suffer from "delusions of grandeur," which I have italicized here. Mitchell chose to omit this in 1965. When "Professor Sea Gull" was released in December 1942, over a year before the event Mitchell claims as the moment of "discovery" in "Joe Gould's Secret" in September 1943, and some twenty-two years before the release of "Joe Gould's Secret," Mitchell not only suspected that the Oral History was not real, but publicly captured Gould's frankness about his deceptions and the status of the Oral History in a *New Yorker* profile. Mitchell thus edits from "Professor Sea Gull" an instance of proof of Gould's self-conscious participation in his own myth, as well as the lie of the Oral History, when he combines it with his subsequent, separate essay of revelation "Joe Gould's Secret."

The full meaning of this revision is completed by the second major passage changed by Mitchell in the 1965 version of "Professor Sea Gull." Again, here is the 1942 original, with the altered lines in italics:

> In recent years Gould has got along on less than five dollars in actual money a week. He has a number of friends—Malcolm Cowley, the writer and editor; Aaron Siskind, the documentary photographer; Cummings, the poet; and [Max] Gordon, the proprietor [of the Village Vanguard], are a few—who give him small sums of money

regularly. *No matter what they think of the Oral History, all these people greatly respect Gould's doggedness. "He is Don Quixote in 1942," Gordon says.* ("Professor" 40, italics mine)

In the 1965 version the final paragraph ends like this: "No matter what they think of the Oral History, all these people have great respect for Gould's pertinacity" (*Old Hotel* 69). Here, Mitchell updates "doggedness" to the more formal adjective "pertinacity," but more importantly he eliminates Gordon's provocative comparison of Gould to Don Quixote. The probable meaning of this peculiar comparison in 1942 versus its omission from the 1965 "Professor Sea Gull" represents the fundamental difference between Mitchell's original and final attempts to represent Gould. Presumably Max Gordon intended Don Quixote to stand in as a general figure for literary madness. Quixote honestly believes himself to be a knight-errant in a romantic world, while the other inhabitants of La Mancha in the "real" world of Cervantes's proto-novel are perplexed by his behavior. Mitchell's original citation of the comparison suggests that the general structure of the Quixote story might be comparable to Gould's perception of himself as writer-errant of a proletarian history, who will capture the lives of a populace whether he is taken seriously or not. Mitchell's subsequent elimination of the line thus indicates a stepping back from Gould's "I have delusions of grandeur" claim, a tacit embrace of Gould's fictional performance. When transforming "Professor Sea Gull" into a Gould-believing preface to the revelatory essay "Joe Gould's Secret," Mitchell chose to omit a salient betrayal of Gould's self-consciousness and became less willing to play a complicit Sancho Panza to a willfully delusional Gould than he was in 1942. The book *Joe Gould's Secret* marks a transfer of Sancho Panza's burden, which is the burden of the willing suspension of disbelief, from Mitchell to the reader. In the book *Joe Gould's Secret*, Mitchell uses subtle, calculated revisions to complete the realistic contract of his portrayal of Joe Gould, and thus to confirm the representation's fictionality (not Gould's).

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"'Yes,' I said, continuing to play the role I had stepped into the afternoon I discovered that the Oral History did not exist—a role that I am only now stepping out of. 'Of course I will'": in these lines, which ostensibly mark the end of Mitchell's career, Mitchell does not abandon his "role" as concealer of the historical phenomenon of Joe Gould's secret writer's block and step into his own. Rather there was never any such thing as Joe Gould's secret writer's block, there were only Joe Gould's complex performances as a struggling, enchanting, disruptive fringe member of modernist literary culture—modernism's Socrates—and Mitchell's attempts to capture Gould in realistic prose. Mitchell's act of "stepping out" need not signify a debilitating career-ending realization at all, which it couldn't have seemed to anyone in 1964 when "Joe Gould's Secret" appeared as Mitchell's longest single work to date. In fact it is a cunning final move to an essay that is *both* a devoted study of a highly contradictory individual and a fictional construct, a biographical novella long in development. In the final lines of the essay, it might be said, Mitchell at once describes and demonstrates for the reader the method by which he has approached Gould all along. Mitchell openly shows Gould's powerful influence, Gould's ability to convince serious writers and intellectuals of the weight of his persona and scant writings. At the same time, he reveals his own deceptive participation in representing the already duplicitous Gould.

"Joe Gould's Secret" emerges from an experience fraught with major and minor deceptions, an inevitability since the essay carefully tracks the life of an eccentric who (not unlike Don Quixote, or for that matter Plato's Socrates) overloads basic literary placeholders. When it comes to the nonproductive "writer" Joe Gould, there can be no question it is very difficult to parse questions of *author* from questions of *character*, as well as the matter of what is *fiction* and what is *nonfiction*. But just as Pound and Cummings did not merely succumb to Gould's surplus of writerly contradictions and the philosophical and practical problems he posed for theorizing the meaning and sustainability of modernist literary culture, neither did Mitchell. Rather, Mitchell sought to offer a non-

"respectabilized" portrait of Gould, who was a known deceiver, in a form capable of representing Gould's known deceptions *and* the fact that they were known. Gould did not overload Mitchell's "creative non-fiction," rendering him silent. He was the perfect subject of a biographical novel. To accurately read *Joe Gould's Secret* it is necessary to resist the hypothesis that Mitchell's experience was one of rising writer's block generated by Gould (or the experience writing about Gould). To identify the narrator with Mitchell in the straightforward way the myth requires is to fail to acknowledge the literary accomplishment of *Joe Gould's Secret*, which is a remarkably original work of biographical fiction and American realism that toes with humor and grace a nonfictional line of its own invention.

Most of Mitchell's essays were originally published as profiles in the pages of *The New Yorker*, which was by institutional design a genre of pleasure and eccentricity.[43] But as we have seen, over the course of his career Mitchell became an accomplished scholar of New York and its people and history. As a staff writer at a magazine, it can be difficult to know how to classify Mitchell as a literary figure, but it is clear that he thought of his profiles and other pieces as literary rather than popular work, a point underscored by the various revisions he made when republishing his essays and stories in book form. For Perrin, *Joe Gould's Secret* is a particularly important text for understanding Mitchell as a literary figure on the grounds of the "necessary revelations that Mitchell makes about himself and his working methods," including, not least, the "infinite patience" Mitchell had when researching Gould as a literary subject. Perrin explains,

> At one point, when he was first preparing to write "Professor Sea Gull," which is a

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[43] As David Remnick explains, *New Yorker* founding editor Harold Ross conceived the profile as a genre because he wanted a recurring feature of a totally different sort, "something different—something sidelong and ironical, a form that prized intimacy and wit over biographical completeness or, God forbid, unabashed hero worship. Ross told his writers and editors that, above all, he wanted to get away from what he was reading in other magazines—all the 'Horatio Alger' stuff" (ix).

nineteen-page article, [Mitchell] and Gould talked from 8 PM to about three in the morning on a Friday night—or, rather, Gould talked and Mitchell listened and paid for the drinks. Then on Saturday night they met again from six to twelve. Sunday they skipped. Then Monday six to midnight they talked, Tuesday 8 PM to 4 AM, and so on through the week. And that was only part of his preparation. 'I had probably come to know more about his past than anybody else in the city and perhaps than anybody else in the world,' Mitchell wrote in 1965. I should think only his old reportorial caution led him to put in the word *probably*. That is part of Joe Mitchell's secret—that whatever he writes about he tends to know better than anybody else in the world. (184, italics original)[44]

In this formulation, the biggest "secret" Mitchell reveals in *Joe Gould's Secret* is neither the secret of Gould's literary nonproductivity nor the secret of his own sign-off from literary production, but the trick, the backstage mechanism, of his own production, which is a matter of the necessarily limited revelation of vast, comprehensive learning, even when he is talking about a homeless bohemian and his supposedly massive book. For Perrin, Mitchell "always had the judgment, at least until *Joe Gould's Secret*, to use only a minute fraction of what he knew in the finished work. His scholarship, which is on a par with his reportorial skill, he has taken care to hide entirely" (184). In fact it is likely that Mitchell's research archive on Gould in his office at *The New Yorker*, which he describes off-handedly in the text of "Joe Gould's Secret" and from which he drew much of the material for the essay, was the most complete available: "A few months ago, while trying to make some room in my office, I got out a collection of papers relating to Gould that filled half a drawer in a filing cabinet: notes I had made of conversations with him, letters from him and letters from others concerning him, copies of little magazines containing essays and poems by him, newspaper clippings about him,

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[44] This passage contains a slight error on Perrin's part; Mitchell wrote "Joe Gould's Secret" as an essay for *The New Yorker* in 1964, but published the book Joe Gould's Secret in 1965.

drawings and photographs of him, and so on" (627). In other words, Mitchell's actual writing only represents the tip of the iceberg of the people, places, histories, and intellectual problems he presents. A meticulous archivist and yet a careful, reticent writer, he is a Hemingway of the real.

As an American literary figure, Mitchell's canonical magnitude lies much nearer to Gould's than it does to that of a writer like Ernest Hemingway. But to reconsider Mitchell's long life and acclaimed body of work in the context of the century he nearly saw in its entirety—Mitchell was born in 1910, and he died in 1996—is to realize retrospectively a variety of means by which Mitchell's reputation could have shifted from the domain of popular journalism to that of serious literary art. Mitchell's own efforts to help this transition along through his various rereleases of essays, stories, and sketches in book form, as well as the efforts of critics including Cowley and Hyman, could only predict such a transformation while his career was happening. But the resonance of his work locates Mitchell as an uncannily central node in the network of the twentieth-century literary trends. Mitchell has been widely acknowledged as a practitioner of "new journalism" techniques "well before *that* concept existed" (Perrin 176, italics original); his embrace of the journalist's creative license distinctly foreshadows the postwar rise of creative nonfiction as serious literary work, which depended strongly on the possibility cultivated in the essays of Truman Capote, Joan Didion, and Norman Mailer that reporting could *be* literature (Perrin goes so far as to call Mitchell's 1948 collection *Old Mr. Flood* "his essay into new journalism" (176)). But Mitchell has also been appreciated as an inheritor of an array of Americanist literary legacies, including Melville's great themes (outcast characters—Gould, for Hyman, was a kind of Ishmael (85)—and eastern seaport culture), Whitmanian democracy (Mitchell's reliance on the rhetorical figure of the catalogue (Rundus xxviii), and his interest in bringing to life the particular experience of the multitude), and Faulkner's "elegiac sense" of history ("Like Gail Hightower in *Light in August*…[Mitchell] knew even

as a boy that America has had many avatars, that its present drags an immense past behind it"
(Perrin 169)).

Despite all the praise Perrin heaped onto Mitchell in 1983, including his optimism for the
future of Mitchell's career, he does offer one complaint about *Joe Gould's Secret*. As the most recent of
Mitchell's "Chinese boxes" at the time of the writing of his own essay, Perrin suggests the book may
be "too large," a problem he blames on Gould's deficiencies: Mitchell "devotes a whole book to
Gould, who is probably not quite worth it" (183). Perrin complains particularly about the
"considerable drama" involved in the "unmasking of Gould…courteously and even admiringly
though Mitchell has done it" (183). Although the book remains for Perrin "a masterful piece of
writing" (183), there does seem to him something incongruous about Mitchell's choice of subject.
But as it turned out, *Joe Gould's Secret* was not Mitchell's final "Chinese box" after all, and the 1965
book *Joe Gould's Secret* does not mark the end of the history when it comes to Mitchell's
representation of Gould. The final box was *Up in the Old Hotel*, which Mitchell released in 1992 after
baiting the press for at least five years with, variably, reticence ("I've been obscure, to say the
least…I've avoided all sorts of publicity. My agent has advised me not to give any interviews") and
deliberate provocation ("As he describes the book, which he says will appear within a year, his voice
becomes urgent, yet never rises above a polite murmur: 'I'd like it to be a kind of surprise'") (Ivry
20). If the two essays of *Joe Gould's Secret* constituted "too large" a box for Perrin in 1983, then
Mitchell certainly filled it in 1992, or rather demonstrated that the box was always full, for one of the
most notable features of *Up in the Old Hotel* is its further organizational decision regarding the two
Gould essays: they are, in the final collection, separated at almost opposite ends of the volume.
Mitchell underscores the importance of this shift in the "Author's Note" to *Up in the Old Hotel*,
which is usually considered to be Mitchell's last piece of new writing:

This book consists of four books that I wrote years and years ago and that have been

out of print for a long time, and of latter-day additions to one of them. The four

books are *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*, 1943; *Old Mr. Flood*, 1948; *The Bottom of the*

Harbor, 1960; and *Joe Gould's Secret*, 1965. I have added several [previously published]

stories to *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*…I wrote two Profiles of Joe Gould. I wrote the

first one, "Professor Sea Gull," in 1942, and used it in *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*.

Twenty-two years later, in 1964, I wrote the second one, "Joe Gould's Secret." I took

"Professor Sea Gull" out of the McSorley book and used it as the first part of the

book, *Joe Gould's Secret*, but for this book I have put it back in its original place in the

McSorley book and "Joe Gould's Secret" now stands by itself. (ix)

Mitchell organizes *Up in the Old Hotel* according to four sections that correlate to each of his "four

books,"[45] but when it came to the matter of what to do with the structure of the "Professor Sea

Gull" / "Joe Gould's Secret" diptych as it occurred in the book *Joe Gould's Secret*, Mitchell decided to

dismantle it, and to return "Professor Sea Gull" to its "original place" in the section subtitled

McSorley's Wonderful Saloon. This final restructuring affirms the significant temporal distance between

Mitchell's first encounter with Gould and his final essay. Whereas the reader of the volume *Joe*

Gould's Secret might be inclined to take the composition of the essays "Professor Sea Gull" and "Joe

Gould's Secret" as a single gesture, that is much more difficult in *Up in the Old Hotel*, where thirty-

two essays separate them. Yet in *Up in the Old Hotel*, Mitchell significantly does not revert "Professor

Sea Gull" to the original 1942 version, which he published with only minor revisions in 1943 in

McSorley's Wonderful Saloon. Instead, he provides the 1965 revision, which, as we have seen, works to

conceal Gould's own awareness of his "delusions of grandeur," his consciousness of his own

authorial myth. In a single editorial gesture, Mitchell thus asserts that his first representation of

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[45] As I have already noted, there is another Mitchell book that preceded the four Mitchell mentions in his "Author's Note." This book, *My Ears Are Bent*, was published in 1938, and it contains selections from Mitchell's pre-New Yorker reporting, none of which are anthologized in *Up in the Old Hotel.*

Gould should be taken in its original historical context—in this case, his work of the early 1940s—*and* claims the right to revise the reader's experience of that first representation. The reader of Joseph Mitchell in 1992 who is informed on the subject of Mitchell's post-1964 publication history might still be inclined to read the final lines of the essay "Joe Gould's Secret" as the writer's sign-off—that essay still concludes Mitchell's oeuvre in the volume *Up in the Old Hotel*—but one should only do so with an awareness that Mitchell worked to control the reader's experience of Joe Gould, and thus the meaning of his actual encounter with Gould, until 1992.

Two decades after *Up in the Old Hotel*, Mitchell is no longer in control, and the appropriation of his own biography and work into a cultural mythology of writer's block, a process catalyzed significantly by the historical distortions of the Tucci film, has reconfigured the meaning of his work. Today, because of the intrigue surrounding the puzzle presented by Mitchell's encounter with Gould, and the complexity of the publication history of Mitchell's essays on Gould, it is impossible to approach Joseph Mitchell without addressing Gould in some way. But to take Gould as Mitchell's doppelganger and the destroyer of a privileged *New Yorker* columnist is a critical mistake. What distinguishes Mitchell from Gould is not a matter of station, or even sanity, but of realist moral fortitude.

The best place to observe this is the essay that defined Joseph Mitchell for Stanley Edgar Hyman, and which should be the natural first place to look for Mitchell's theory of literature now that the book *Joe Gould's Secret* is no longer Mitchell's final published work. In conclusion, let us consider the title essay of the collection *Up in the Old Hotel*, originally published in 1952. There Mitchell describes, in what is the most personally revealing of Mitchell's essays before "Joe Gould's Secret," his tendency to "get up early and go down to the Fulton Fish Market" whenever he felt the need "to rid [his] thoughts of death and doom" (439). At the core of the "Up in the Old Hotel" essay is Mitchell's anecdote of an encounter with Louis Morino, the Italian-American proprietor of a

"cheerful market restaurant" named Sloppy Louie's (439), who tells Mitchell an extended story about the history of the building in which his restaurant is housed on the ground floor. Significantly, Morino claims to be afraid to board the rickety elevator in the five-story building he has rented for twenty-two years to see what lies in the dusty space formerly occupied by the Fulton Ferry Hotel, before the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge and later Prohibition put the establishment out of business. According to some of the older patrons who frequent the restaurant, many of the hotel's fixtures may remain intact. Morino explains, at the end of a long account of the hotel's history, "'If I could get upstairs just once in that damned old elevator and scratch around in those hotel registers up there and whatever the hell else is stored up there, it might be possible I'd find out a whole lot more'" (459). For the infinitely curious Mitchell, this is all the temptation it takes. Here is their subsequent exchange:

"Look, Louie," I said, "I'll go up in the elevator with you."

"You think you would," Louie said, "but you'd just take a look at it, and then you'd back out."

"I'd like to see inside the cage, at least," I said.

Louie looked at me inquisitively. "You really want to go up there?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"The next time you come down here, put on the oldest clothes you got, so the dust don't make any difference," Louie said, "and we'll go up and try out the elevator."

"Oh, no," I said. "Now or never. If I think it over, I'll change my mind."

"It's your own risk," he said.

"Of course," I said. (459)

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What Morino and Mitchell find in the hotel is, predictably, mostly dust, but Mitchell reveals much about himself in this passage, in particular, his impulse to put himself at hazard in order to inhabit, quite literally, the potentially perilous space of history. When presented with an opportunity for understanding the reality of human experience, Mitchell says "Yes," boldly embracing his "own risk."

Gould, on the other hand, at least according to Mitchell's candid remarks in a quotation on the dust jacket to the Modern Library edition of *Joe Gould's Secret*, might have had a very different response. Here is Mitchell's *very* last published word on Gould, issued shortly before his own death: "'Nowadays…when [Gould's] name comes into my mind, it is followed immediately by another name—the name of Bartleby the Scrivener—and then I invariably recall Bartleby's haunting, horrifyingly lonely remark, 'I would prefer not to.'" Hyman had his Melvillian types wrong in 1965 when he supposed that Gould was an Ishmael figure in the Mitchell-Gould encounter. It is easy to see how Gould might have seemed like Ishmael the "paradigm of alienated man" from Mitchell's portrayal (Hyman 85), but Gould was in the end rather a Bartleby in the eyes of his most generous critic, an outcast and a conscientious objector to the literary establishment, not an Ishmael, who is also an outcast but who is just as importantly the only unscathed witness to a remarkable tale. The Ishmael-figure of the Mitchell-Gould encounter—its survivor and teller—is Mitchell, the voice animating the stories and lives of *Up in the Old Hotel*.

Henry Roth's literary output was bimodal, peaking once in 1934 with the publication of *Call It Sleep* and, despite the resurrection of *Call It Sleep* in the 1960s and Roth's sudden rise to fame, not again until the 1990s with the release of his massive, unfinished four-volume novel *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. Ever since *Call It Sleep*'s belated critical success as a modernist classic, public interest in the novel has been sustained in large part as an effect of general curiosity in the perceived "block" and its possible causes. The meaning of the entire scenario, however, is one of the key problems Roth takes up himself in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. Roth has often been taken as the quintessential example of a blocked American writer. In fact he is better examined as a peculiar autobiographical novelist who, late in life, capitalized on his block myth, and rewove the story of his long life into a strange, anti-modernist metafiction.

This case study pursues three distinct but related projects. First, I profile the scale and reach of the myth of Henry Roth, illustrating its peculiarity even in the context of American letters where belated acknowledgment for literary work is business as usual. Then, I demonstrate the critical danger of taking the myth of Roth's writer's block for granted by tracking a subtle, especially problematic Roth myth inside the only book-length biography on the writer, Steven Kellman's 2005 account *Redemption: The Life of Henry Roth*. Then, taking Roth's engagement of modernism as a problematic, paralyzing aesthetic in *Mercy of a Rude Stream* as the starting point for placing him more generally in the context of twentieth-century literary trends, I move in a new direction in conclusion. As we shall see, Henry Roth is no mere curiosity of twentieth-century American letters. His case is entangled profoundly in a general crisis of transatlantic literary modernity, which carried additional ethical and philosophical complexities for Roth as a Jewish American writer. In fact it will be shown that the biographical and critical obsession with variably understanding and debunking the meaning of Roth's perceived silence as an individual has all but prevented us from seeing him as a key figure

in a larger literary historical question into which he wrote himself in his final novel: the meaning of modernist attempts to break from history in a century of Jewish history fractured by the Holocaust and marked by an increasingly urgent, complex choice between Diaspora and Israel.

Henry Roth's Monumental Block

In a 1993 essay anticipating the release of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, writer Leonard Michaels characterized the case of Henry Roth like this:

> The disclosure that a new Roth novel will be appearing will amaze his admirers, who long ago had understandably abandoned such a hope. It is like hearing that Ralph Ellison is publishing a new novel 42 years after 'The Invisible Man' [sic] or J.D. Salinger is preparing a sequel to 'The Catcher in the Rye.'…Over the 60 years that Roth has battled his afflictions he has written short pieces, but they have been so rare that many of his readers have long thought him dead…What Mr. Roth has now done, in effect, is to have gone back to that point in the 1930s after the publication of 'Call It Sleep' and attempted the second novel he should have done then. (3)

Michaels could not have known the extent to which Roth's new book would pursue the meaning of the sixty years between his novels, but this passage demonstrates the two related fallacies frequently engendered by the myth. In the first place, in his haste to account for Roth's writer's block, Michaels understates the complexities of a large swath of historical time, generalizing a personal history that can only bear in specific ways on our understanding of Roth's work. In his comparison of Roth to Ellison and Salinger, moreover, Michaels also reduces the reputations of three very different writers to the general American myth of the severely blocked writer, obscuring critical comparisons of potential cultural significance: that *Invisible Man* and *Call It Sleep*, for example, might be readable in the first place in the particular terms of shared cultural experience between African Americans and

American Jews in New York City, and not interchangeably as expressions of a general American myth and cliché. It would of course be interesting to compare the psychology and consequences of Ellison's move to academia to those of Roth's departure from the New York literary scene for rural Maine in the 1940s, but if a reductive, schematic outline of either of those two writer's complex literary careers is what directs us to the comparison, we risk losing sight of its subtler cultural meanings.

Roth's actual production profile is a different story. Roth kept journals and notebooks throughout many of the years associated with his silence, and although he had the known tendency to periodically destroy them, a problem that limits our ability to gauge his total output of writing, the large collection of documents that survive in the archives of the American Jewish Historical Society prove that the perceived silence, especially when formulated as the sixty-year period between the publication of *Call It Sleep* and the release of the first volume of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, is overestimated. For example, between April and December 1939, a period usually dismissed as part of the long block, Roth hand-wrote over six-hundred pages of narrative in his journal where he records and analyzes his daily experience in New York City with more observational sensitivity and stylistic care than what can be found in many modern novels. Although never published and never intended for publication, the journal is a fascinating document for anyone interested in Roth or even in the general history of the period: Roth gives his reactions to the start of World War Two,[46] offers lucid accounts of city life, and paints vivid, first-hand portraits of the people he encounters as striking as any *New Yorker* profile. Even though Roth would not sustain the output of the 1939 journals, he apparently had written enough material during the thirties and early forties, excluding

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[46]Roth initially jokes about the war as an inconvenience to his daily existence, but then, abruptly, thinks of Eliot and the Marxist class struggle: "So clearly it seems to me now I see Eliot's capitulation as symbolic of his class, the bourgeoisie ready to return ever from the point of its departure to the medievalism that begot it" (Box 12, Folder 10 449-50).

the long journal mentioned above, to fuel a bonfire in October 1946 that his sons would never forget (Kellman 198).

Even if we do not consider Roth's private journals part of his body of work, the basic and underrepresented historical fact that Roth's departure from the publication of literary fiction only marked sixteen (and not sixty) years of an eighty-nine year existence indicates the scale of the myth. That total publication silence did not commence with any particular dramatic instance. It did not begin with any known crisis related to Roth's supposed guilt over the incestuous relationship he claims to have maintained with his sister Rose, which by the publication of *Call It Sleep* was long over. It did not begin when Roth notoriously burned his second, proletarian-themed novel, for which he had already received an advance from Scribners, out of political discouragement in May 1935. It did not begin when Roth met his future wife Muriel Parker at the Yaddo artist colony in the summer of 1938, subsequently abandoning his decade-long relationship with poet and New York University professor Eda Lou Walton (a prime advocate of his work and the dedicatee of *Call It Sleep*). Nor did it begin with the outbreak of World War Two, which would devastate the land of Roth's birth (Roth was born in Tysmenitz, Galicia, now in the western Ukraine, and brought to New York as an infant). Instead it commenced quietly in September 1940, after the publication of a short story titled "Many Mansions," around the time Roth was learning precision grinding as a way of making a decent living for the first time in his life and of avoiding military service, and just a few months before the conception of his first son. And his publication silence ended on July 14, 1956 with the release of the story "Petey and Yotsee and Mario" in *The New Yorker*,[47] a prestigious publication with which Roth never cut his ties, and still seventeen years before his he retirement to

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[47]It should be noted that Roth did publish one short article in 1954 in *The Magazine for Ducks and Geese* shortly after opening his waterfowl processing business in Maine, "Equipment for Pennies." I do not list it here because, as a short guide describing how to make farming equipment from junkyard materials, it does not constitute literary fiction, although it might be suggested that Roth could have been inspired as a writer by the fact that any magazine would publish his writing.

Albuquerque, New Mexico where he eventually began work on *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. It is of course true that Roth's publication output would remain remarkably sluggish compared to other writers of his stature until the release of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, that he would lose his bearings as a writer and that all his published works would remain very short until his end-of-life tetralogy, but the final public perception of Roth as a legendarily blocked writer exceeds the realities of his actual output in his journals and the concrete outline of his publication history. Whatever alarm we may feel over how the gifted author of *Call It Sleep* once abandoned literature and nearly ruined our chance to admire what is now a prime canonical example of Jewish American modernism is only available to us as hindsight. Roth's total literary output, and even the frequency with which he published, exceeds that of many writers whose productivity narratives are never questioned.

Roth's myth has inflated in the years since the publication of the colossal *Mercy of a Rude Stream* and Roth's death. Today, Roth is probably more famous for his silence than his work, and as a result even subtle biographical and critical accounts often cannot help reinforcing the myth, at least indirectly. Since the publication of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* and Roth's death, the myth has advanced even further into critical and popular perceptions. Today, it is difficult to find a critical or biographical representation of Roth that does not begin with a discussion of the myth. Alan Gibbs's narratological study of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*—the only sustained, book-length reading of Roth's "second career"—probes the depths of Roth's psychology and aesthetic decisions in the writing of his final novel, but still begins by identifying Roth's life story as one marked by writer's block in his very first lines: "In 1934, at the age of twenty-eight, Henry Roth published his first novel, *Call It Sleep*. In 1994, he published his second, the first in the *Mercy of a Rude Stream* tetralogy. In the intervening sixty years, Roth published only a handful of short pieces, having fallen into a crushing period of writer's block, the longest ever experienced by any American novelist of note" (1). Even Kellman's careful biography, which actively works to resist the dangers of a myth that "distorts and

simplifies the truths of a complex life" (8), details from Roth's life that might have generated

contextualized, local meaning in another writer's biography are sometimes reduced into implied

causes for the block, and can give way to new, secondary myths. As Jonathan Rosen's recent

characterization of the scenario in the *New Yorker* demonstrates, the stakes of our preoccupation are

high: "The reasons for Roth's monumental block—which include but are not limited to

Communism, Jewish self-loathing, incest, and depression—are ultimately as mysterious as the

reasons for his art and are in some ways inseparable from them" (1). When it comes to the popular

and critical perception of Henry Roth, minor biographical myths spin by way of insinuation toward

cultural clichés including stereotypes of Communist intellectuals paralyzed by their ideals and "self-

loathing" American Jews, and then give way to the grander cultural myth of writer's block. Henry

Roth's life and art have been deliberately and accidentally rendered in this formulation for too long:

a string of myths, some verging on the brink of abusive cultural stereotypes, in the service of the

larger cultural myth of the blocked American writer.

Not insignificantly, this phenomenon is something Roth considers himself by way of his

avatar Ira Stigman in the metafictional sections of the largely autobiographical *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.

Here is the octogenarian Ira on the matter, from his desk in an Albuquerque trailer park:

> The question was: why did those first (and sometimes only) novels frequently have
>
> such wide appeal? They were often best-sellers, if not at the outset, then, like his
>
> own, and others as well, eventually. Why? The answer was that it was not only the
>
> writer, the literary artist, who suffered from disabling discontinuity; it was the
>
> multitude, the populace, the reading public who were troubled by the selfsame thing
>
> as well…That was what his fable had been all about without his knowing it;
>
> unwittingly he had struck the universal chord of what had affected millions of
>
> people. (*From Bondage* 30)

While it was taking place, Roth could not have known that his publication silence would strike any "chord" at all. Until 1964, Roth was not a major literary figure, and probably did not have the perspective (or the vanity) to suppose that his affliction would be mythologized by critics as legendary, archetypical writer's block. But here, at the end of his life, Roth not only insists on the centrality of his mythological silence to his reputation—his "fable," as he puts it—but does so *inside the text* of the third volume of the massive novel cycle that should have put the final nail in the coffin of the mythological Henry Roth whose life was defined by block. The scenario is as revealing as it is perplexing. *Call It Sleep* was brought back from oblivion on the basis of its merit in the 1960s as part of a general Jewish American literary renaissance, but by the 1990s even Roth would forget the benevolence of the two publication houses—Cooper Square in 1960 and Avon in 1964—that took new risks on the book many years after it had gone out of print, imagining for himself that his probably desolate but undoubtedly inflated departure from literary life had been his true literary capital all along.

The rising reputation of an American national literature on the world scene in the twentieth century depended largely on the critical impulse to resurrect forgotten American writers from oblivion on the basis of the merit of their work. Emily Dickinson published virtually nothing during her lifetime but emerged from history during the first stirrings of the modernist period as a brilliant writer of poems revered for their generic isolation and formal intricacy. Herman Melville faced death after watching his sales and reputation decline with each new labor, resolving that his body, soul, and work would be annihilated in a single swipe with his passing, only to be emphatically reclaimed in the twentieth century as the tragic author of some of the most intellectually complex and now most widely-studied American novels of all time. Even the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose bestselling *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played a pivotal role in American history as a catalyst for abolitionist debate in the 1850s, which culminated in the Civil War and the end of slavery in the US in the

1860s, might represent an instance of this trend. The critical perception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in recent multiculturalist literary and historical contexts has been largely negative, but the book's ability to generate new controversies demonstrates the rediscovered centrality of Stowe's work in the canon of the American political novel. Although the phenomenon is by no means uniquely American, the canonization of American authors has been, perhaps more than in the cases of other national literatures, driven by processes of reclamation, of realizing belatedly which authors have mattered whether or not those authors could have realized their importance on their own.

Unlike Dickinson, Melville, and Stowe, Henry Roth was alive to witness and participate in the resurrection of his first novel, but he is no exception to this trend: when *Call It Sleep* was finally rereleased, the novel, which had persisted just barely in critical memory on account of a few favorable reviews, was recently the subject of renewed attention by esteemed critics Leslie Fiedler and Alfred Kazin on the basis of its merit and its importance to an incipient Jewish American canon (Kellman 217-8). As Fiedler put it in 1956, "For sheer virtuosity, *Call It Sleep* is hard to beat; no one has ever distilled such poetry and wit from the counterpoint between the maimed English and the subtle Yiddish of the immigrant…To let another year go by without reprinting it would be unforgiveable" ("Neglected Books" 478). In his 1960 *Commentary* article "Henry Roth's Neglected Masterpiece" marking the first rerelease of *Call It Sleep*, Fiedler barely even mentions Roth's disappearance from the literary world; like the proponents of neglected nineteenth-century American authors, he focuses his complaint on the contemporary critical underappreciation of Roth's work, not on Roth's inability to generate a follow-up novel. Yet now, a decade and a half after Henry Roth's death, over forty years since *Call It Sleep* was brought back into print, many readers of Roth are just as interested in the question of *whether* the political disappointments and notorious incestuous romps of a "self-loathing" New York Jewish novelist made him go silent for decades as they are in the logic of the four-volume novelized explanation he offered for himself on

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the eve of his death, as if Roth stepped away from novels with *Call It Sleep* altogether and his final autobiographical novel *is* his life and not a fictionalized rendition with its own arguments and distortions.[48]

Insofar as block is an aspect of any act of the human will, Henry Roth obviously experienced blocking in the writing of his various texts. But our own stakes in Roth's block myth as readers and sometimes as critics, not to mention Roth's final stake in the myth, are more significant than we have imagined. The scenario is partly an effect of a rapidly changing literary culture where the traditional categories *writer, reader*, and *critic* no longer hold, where the respective activities traditionally associated with each of these categories are migrating increasingly to electronic media and have for some time been taking place, especially in the US, in close proximity and along blurred lines in the halls of college and university English departments. It is nevertheless strange to marvel at where we find ourselves when it comes to Roth: accidental and sometimes willing conspirators in the myth of a novelist's silence when realistic literary productivity has been, since the earliest examples of the English language novel, one of the basic expectations suspended by the reader as part of the novel's epistemological contract. As I have already suggested, the earliest novelistic texts in the language are, after all, tales that are frequently not just told but supposedly written by relatively unlettered narrators who deliberately call attention to both their unlikeliness as writers and to the hostility of the contexts of their supposed literary productions, and yet who, at the same time, endure for their eccentricity as storytellers. *Of course* Robinson Crusoe had the will to keep up that journal on the desert island amid his industrious effort to reproduce in microcosm the civilization he left behind, at least until he suspiciously runs out of ink and stops marking off the days. Of course

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[48] To make the probably too-obvious analogy (thanks to their common surname), there is no reason why conflating Henry Roth with his character Ira Stigman is not as problematic as conflating Philip Roth with his long-running, semi-autobiographical character Nathan Zuckerman. If the reader and critic are prone to mixing up the two in the case of Henry and Ira, perhaps that is because from Henry Roth we do not have the record of vocal insistence of the difference between life and art that Philip Roth has publicly asserted for years.

Richardson's Pamela Andrews wrote all those letters to her father in the midst of her household duties and between advances from Mr. B. Of course Tristram Shandy was so determined an autobiographer that, instead of just sulking away from his task, he would bash his head against the problem of how to write one's life story while one's life is always expiring over the course of nine volumes. The heft of the document in the reader's hands *should* seem a confirmation of its textual realism instead of an obstacle to the hasty abandonment of disbelief.[49] But when a rising novelist from the real world stops publishing novels, when he moreover commits the sacrilegious act of burning a novel in progress commissioned by none other than eminent Scribners editor Maxwell Perkins, readers and critics move quickly to the assumption that he must be making a departure from writing entirely, as if to assert, curiously, that the backstage processes of novel-writing could not possibly include periods of silence, solipsistic drafting, and abstract journaling, let alone the destruction of a novel for which one has already been advanced payment.

Obviously this is not the case. These obscure and sometimes very banal processes have always been part of the lives of writers. In fact, the interplay between periods of struggle and periods of renewed output are the basis of that other great myth of twentieth-century American literary productivity, the myth of the novelist as adventurer-craftsman most famously embodied by Ernest Hemingway, who wrote the following lines in the preface to his 1938 edition of collected short stories:

> In going where you have to go, and doing what you have to do, and seeing what you
>
> have to see, you dull and blunt the instrument you write with. But I would rather
>
> have it bent and dull and know I had to put it on the grindstone again and hammer it
>
> into shape and put a whetstone to it, and know that I had something to write about,

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[49] For a thorough account of the paradoxes of eighteenth-century novelistic discourse, see Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality." Gallagher suggests that the seeming contradiction between the novelistic impulse toward "verisimilitude" and its fictionality are in fact the defining features of the genre, where "revealing and concealing fiction…are one and the same process" (337).

than to have it bright and shining and nothing to say, or smooth and well-oiled in the

closet, but unused. (vi)

This glimpse of the self-cultivated Hemingway myth reads as such: Hemingway is entirely aware of

his public image in this preface and actively embraces the cultural cliché of the writer who, jaded and

made "blunt" by his experiences in the world, must now relearn the rituals and routines of the

workshop. But why should the fact that fiction writers must perennially live through extra-literary

experience and then madly labor to rediscover their talent be part of a cultural mythology at all?

With the advantage to view the biographies of writers such as Roth and Hemingway from the

perspective of the second decade of the twenty-first century—from across the postwar era that saw

a proliferation of creative writing programs in the US, programs operating under the assumption

that novel-writing is as much a craft as it is a spell—contemporary readers, and particularly critics

who share university departments with creative writing faculty and students, should know by now

that novelists can live ordinary lives outside their writing and must cultivate their art over time.[50] Yet

more than ever we tend as a culture toward myths in which literary productivity is dramatized, an

affair of frenzy or block.

In 1975, when his plans for *Mercy of a Rude Stream* were still gestating, Roth explained his

years of reduced literary productivity like this: "I've got a number of theories. It seems I develop a

new one just about every week. I've explained it to myself a number of ways over the years, and the

explanations keep changing" (*Shifting Landscape* 76). If we take Roth at his word, then the

biographer's task may be simply one of taking in the many eddies of the "shifting landscape" of his

life. After all, as Jonathan Rosen supposes about potential Roth biographers,

What American writer wouldn't be tempted to tell a story that begins at the gates of

Ellis Island and moves through the radicalizing hardships of the Great Depression,

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[50] For an extended treatment of the complexities of "[t]he American writer's intimacy with the university in our time"
(21), see Mark McGurl's *The Program Era.*

the psychic traumas of family abuse, the seductions of Communism, and the lure of the American West before arriving at the promise of regeneration through confession and acceptance of self? (6)

But preoccupation with this schematic biographical outline—less an American archetype than an American stereotype—risks underestimating the meaning of Roth's final return to novel writing. *Mercy of a Rude Stream* is a transparent, thinly veiled autobiography in every sense except for one, its most basic generic identity, where it is a novel and where Roth participates in the cultivation of his own myth. Because of the explicit, sometimes heavy-handed metafictional strand in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, it is easy to take Ira Stigman as a spokesman for Roth. Like Roth, he rails against Joyce and modernism as often as he can, and suggests that we should not press on the myth of the writer who goes silent since his story is a general "fable" of discontinuous modernity. But to take Roth's bait, to make the straightforward equation between Roth and Stigman, is to overlook what is obvious about Roth from his productivity narrative: at the very least, Stigman's anguish and vast theories about writerly silence cannot fully represent Roth's experience because they occur in the volume that should render them obsolete. Roth and Stigman may be far more proximate than Tristram Shandy and Laurence Sterne, but Ira Stigman is not merely the pseudonym by which Roth limits his legal and intellectual liability. When Roth imagines Stigman imagining his silence as the "universal chord of what had affected millions of people," he may well intend to rewrite literary history, to suppose that his mythological writer's block and not the appeal of his talent to American critics and editors was the source of his own final success. But the material reality of the novel in which it occurs effectively nullifies Stigman's theory, at least as it applies to the work of his author Henry Roth. For Roth to get away with the brilliant con in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, the reader must willingly surrender both historical and representational disbelief to the idea of the blocked American writer.

The critic cannot give up so much. In fact, for Roth to be appreciated fully as a significant American and Jewish American novelist, the idea of the blocked writer—and Roth's participation in it—must be recognized as a cultural fiction with the power to distort novelistic and critical discourse alike. As we shall see, the peril of the myth cannot simply be displaced, even in the context of a generous biography whose central project is "redemption." It must be confronted directly.

"An Artist of Death"

As the first person to attempt a book-length biography of Henry Roth, as Roth's commissioned rather than self-nominated biographer,[51] Steven Kellman approaches his subject with caution. In his introduction, Kellman explains that he actively writes against myth, against popular conceptions that take Roth as "the proverbial Rip Van Winkle of modern authors" and as a writer whose perplexing silence must have some revealing psychological key (8). Instead, from the outset of *Redemption*, Kellman argues Roth should not be thought of as "a puzzle to be solved" but "a mystery to be pondered" (10). This is because of the great danger of permanently reducing Roth into a mere curiosity of twentieth-century American letters. "The myth of Roth as American literature's spurned prodigy," Kellman writes, "whose debut was dazzling and departure luminous but whose center was a black hole, distorts and simplifies the truths of a complex life" (8). Rather than pin the enigmatic Roth wriggling on the wall of blocked American writers, Kellman suggests that we would be better off to approach the rise, decline, and return of Roth's literary ambition as a narrative that can be pieced together despite its strong contradictions. *Redemption*, Kellman assures us, will be a careful biography locating the "tie that binds one fragment to the next" in Roth's "quest for redemption" (10).

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[51] Kellman did not know Roth personally, but Roth's editor and agent, Robert Weil and Roslyn Tang, approached him to write the biography on the merit of his several published articles on the writer.

But entangled in Kellman's effort to trace how real events from the life of Henry Roth have been transformed into cornerstones for the popular perception of him as the most spectacularly blocked writer in American literary history is an insidious new myth. Kellman finds there are many debunkable events to account for in Roth's undeniably eccentric life story, some of which are admittedly difficult to explain for their melodrama and occasional violence. A key episode for Kellman is the day Roth suffered a blow to his political idealism when a group of perturbed union bosses brutally attacked him, to them a youthful "Jewish Bolshevik" agitator (145), as he attempted to hand out Communist Party leaflets to mistreated New York dockworkers. Afterwards, Roth went back to his apartment and promptly burned the manuscript of the nearly complete, Scribners-commissioned novel that would have followed *Call It Sleep* on the grounds that its rigid, socialist-realist narrative mode—so different from the organic modernism and language play of *Call It Sleep*—would now prove unsustainable for him as a writer. Notice how Kellman characterizes the experience by moving in two directions at once, strongly away from the productivity myth with his parodic tone and concluding statement, but toward a new and highly conjectural possibility with a reference to Nazi book burning:

> In the torching of literary ambition was born the legend of Henry Roth the master novelist who called it silence for sixty years. According to the familiar story, the anchorite of the Pine Tree State, the Jewish American Rimbaud, abjuring the novelist's rough magic, now endured the longest writer's block of any major figure in American literary history, before recovering his ambition and his powers. But Roth's gesture in burning his own manuscript—at a time when Nazis were incinerating books—was but a single, dramatic episode in a long life that was far more complicated than the legend. (146)

Here we observe not just a reiteration of the debunking project Kellman describes in his introduction, but an instance where Kellman actively recasts an event from Roth's life that has lent itself to myth with particular potency. Roth's "long life," Kellman reminds us, "was far more complicated than the legend," and the drama of the burning of the manuscript is not to be mistaken as an origin of the myth. At the same time, however, practically in the same utterance where he appears to depart from the myth of Roth's silence, Kellman coolly and parenthetically ties Roth's gesture to a broad historical narrative, the rise of Nazism in Germany and the appalling consequences of that rise for European Jews, at the risk of sparking a new literary myth: that something in the isolated, eccentric existence of Jewish American author Henry Roth may suggest the imagery of the Holocaust, as if the latter idea were already enclosed in the logic of the former.

Kellman cannot avoid addressing directly the matter of the Holocaust and Roth's seeming indifference to it in his contemporaneous writings. Roth evaded direct exposure to the European war and American military service as an essential worker, but, as Kellman notes, he would remain generally reticent on Nazism even after its horrors were becoming clear to the world. Kellman finds this lack of reaction to be typical of American Jews of that period: "Mindful of New World anti-Semitism, they were wary about jeopardizing their own position by any appearance of special pleading" (173). In Kellman's subsequent chapters on Roth's departure from New York for Boston and then rural Maine in the 1940s, however, in his account of the period most strongly identified with Roth's silence, the mythological bond linking Roth's experience during the silent years to the imagery of the Holocaust steadily escalates. First, Kellman explains how after the war in October 1946 Roth once again made a "bonfire" of his "literary vanities" and "ignited a pyre of manuscripts," this time in reaction to the early Cold War anti-communist suspicion under which Roth was surveilled for several years by the FBI: "In the thickening atmosphere of political repression he was anxious to obliterate any documents that might prove incriminating; but he was

also intent on marking an end to his identity as a writer" (198-9). On its own, separated by several chapters from Kellman's earlier suggestion, this new episode of document burning does not necessarily suggest Nazi book incineration unless we recall the earlier allusion. Yet it bleeds undeniably, in the following paragraph, into a general portrait of Roth's potential for cruel and unusual violence. Here is Kellman's explanation of how Roth, frustrated by the expense of raising his family, once brutally killed a puppy leftover from the family collie's litter:

> How, while struggling to sustain a family of four, could he possibly feed a mongrel that would probably eventually give birth to other hungry dogs? Roth seized the puppy and hanged her from a makeshift noose. But the victim survived. After bungling the execution, Roth took a club and bludgeoned the hapless creature to death. Like the immolation of Roth's manuscripts, the murder of the puppy was an expression of self-loathing, combined this time with physical cruelty. He buried the victim secretly, expunging yet another bit of Henry Roth. After such mortification, redemption seemed remote. (199)

This portrait of Roth as an impulsive but determined murderer of puppies, eager to express his own "self-loathing" and to rectify the "unjust suffering" he experienced at the hands of his own father, is then followed by an account by Roth's son Hugh of an instance involving a pet duck named "Gimpy," born with a deformed foot, whom Roth also executed (200). And in the midst of all this, Kellman quickly mentions that Hugh "was himself the occasional object of his father's fits of rage," that Roth periodically "beat his young son" (199-200), understating the significance of this new revelation with two oblique remarks. Kellman uses these incidents primarily to suggest Roth's psychological instability during the Maine years and to acknowledge, however quietly, his capacity for domestic violence, but their curious presentation, tied in the biography to the "immolation of Roth's manuscripts," mythologizes Roth anew as a figure whose decline as an artist—whose "fable,"

to recall the language of Roth's final novel—might be but a note in a globally reverberant chord of violence. Just beneath the rhetorical surface of *Redemption*, Kellman offers a vision of the silent Henry Roth who was not just a hopelessly repressed, self-loathing Jew before that cliché would come into American cultural vogue in the 1960s and 1970s with books like *Portnoy's Complaint* and the films of Woody Allen, but a Jew who also subconsciously channeled the racial vengeance that took place in the land of his birth and revisited it upon pitiful family pets, his sons, and his writing.

This is no mirage. Shortly before Kellman moves away from his account of Roth's silence, he pricks our ears to the possibility of the new myth of Roth's violence one last time. When describing how Roth went into the waterfowl business after deciding he was done working as an aide at the Augusta State Hospital—a mental institution where he eventually began "to feel as if he were an involuntary inmate rather than an aide" (204)—Kellman writes, "Using his brook, his barn, and some help from the boys, he began 'Roth's Waterfowl'—a family operation that extracted meat and feathers from ducks and geese. Convinced that his artistry was dead, Roth became an artist of death, the self-taught scourge of waterfowl" (204). As Kellman goes on to explain the intricacies of this new "artistry," the wildly suggestive pitch of his usually sober biographical rhetoric could hardly be higher: "Filling up his killing cones with flapping, squawking victims at once intensified the depression and diverted him from his own preoccupations. After snuffing out their lives, Roth dipped bodies into molten wax" (204-5). Standard accounts of this period in Roth's life have typically dismissed the years as Roth's bleakest, but were they really his bloodiest?[52] Roth's farming enterprise was certainly unexpected work for an incipient member of the Greenwich Village literati to take up, and twenty-first century animal-rights politics can in retrospect make the business seem a particularly distasteful enterprise, but Kellman goes beyond the call of biographical duty when he

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[52] Earlier critics have not necessarily thought so; Bonnie Lyons, in her opening biographical sketch to the 1976 study *Henry Roth: The Man and His Work*, even praises Roth for his entrepreneurial ingenuity (25), although, as Kellman explains, Roth would struggle to make a profit with the farm (206).

renders Roth's retreat a macabre affair in which the writer became, in no uncertain terms, an "artist" executioner who spent his days "snuffing out…lives," who abstractly "dipped bodies" into wax. It may be an irony of fate that Roth, ingenious even when away from writing, would depart from publishing novels only to wind up in rural Maine devising homemade "killing cones" and other inventions to simplify the dirty work of processing waterfowl for human consumption (204). It may be an irony of literary history that he would "break his long literary silence"—if silence is what those years were—by publishing in 1954 his first article in fourteen years on how to make junkyard poultry-farm equipment in *The Magazine for Ducks and Geese*.[53] But the case for Roth's reinvention of himself in Maine as an "artist of death," whether as a delayed psychological response to history or in reflection of the irrational logic of an atrocity in which he was hardly a direct victim so much as an escapee—many members of Roth's family who remained in Austria perished in Hitler's death camps, but he, his parents, and even his grandparents all escaped the destruction—cannot become an irony of general history by way of suggestion alone. Clearly Roth did not give up writing to become the unlikely mastermind of a Holocaust for Maine's ducks and geese. The possibility that Roth's departure and subsequent life in Maine might contain such a general historical meaning is instead an audacious, conjectural argument that might be made only with considerable labor, and at considerable risk.

This is undoubtedly why, in the end, even Kellman does not dare to make the link between Roth's career and the Holocaust except by suggestion, and why it is impossible—and hardly my intention—to put him on trial. It is uncanny that the new possibility does not permeate the entire

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[53]Kellman claims this directly: "Roth…took pride in his resourcefulness and parsimony in the business of dispatching birds…it even inspired him enough to break his long literary silence" (205) But, to reiterate my earlier note, although I have elsewhere argued that Roth's story has been distorted by our unwillingness to accept his writing outside novels, and particularly his journals, as part of his productivity narrative,   It is impossible to take the publication of "Equipment for Pennies" to be the moment at which Roth broke his total publication silence, a period I take as the sixteen years between 1940 and 1956, which Roth published "Petey and Yotsee and Mario." Although we might imagine that the publication of anything might have been an achievement for Roth, and a catalyst for his renewed interest in writing, the piece is entirely technical.

biography, but begins precisely as Kellman narrates and debunks the moment often associated with the beginning of the legendary block: the day Roth burned the manuscript of his second novel. It is moreover surprising, though for a reason with great cultural and historical significance, that this seeming Holocaust strand could occur in a usually sober biography that actively works to soften the popular myth of Roth's perceived silence; quite probably it indicates that Kellman seeks to offer, by means of mythologizing the darkness of Roth's years of publication silence, a possible reading of his life that helps explain the other inconsistency marking his biography as a Jew: Roth's striking political turn from Communist Party activism to Zionism in the 1960s, after which he even attempted to relearn Hebrew in his New Mexico trailer in the hope of someday making *aliyah*. But Kellman never names the Holocaust strand as such, and, if we take him at his word that his biography is a book about *Redemption* and that he means to "ponder" Roth instead of trying to "solve" him, then the problem of knowing what to do with the Holocaust strand in the biography remains—and this is the case for all myths—the responsibility of the critic. And for the critic, the myth of Henry Roth can never be a metonym for the Holocaust. In fact, the prospect that the structure of the eccentric behavior of a Jewish American writer during a period of literary silence could suggest an equivalence with the systematized genocide of six-million European Jews is at best a dangerously unstable metaphor, which indicates the distortional power of block myths. This is not to say that Roth's gloom during the years of his reduced literary productivity was not amplified by his awareness of the events of the Holocaust and its implications for Jews living in fear of anti-Semitism worldwide; the Holocaust easily could have been one stimulus for Roth's desolation and departure from publication, and Roth obviously was aware of the presence of strong anti-Semitic currents in the US during the middle of the century. But supposing that Roth might have abandoned New York and publication as a personal response to immediate and global prejudice against Jews hardly requires Roth's experience to be reimagined in the terms and imagery of the Holocaust.

Instead, Roth's experience might only be suggestive of the European atrocities as a response to those crimes and the cultural hatred they embodied, even if it may take on the appearance of some sort of subconscious reenactment.

It may well be shocking to a twenty-first century critical sensibility to imagine that a writer who might have made a life among the artists and scholars of vibrant, mid-century Greenwich Village would abandon his career in letters to end up slaughtering waterfowl in Maine. But however dark the years in New England might have really been for Roth they cannot suggest the Holocaust as a matter of mythological substitution. The scalar difference between the events is far too great, and to force the comparison as metonym is to belittle at once the meaning of the Nazi destruction and the meaning of Roth's writing career. What the possible Holocaust strand in *Redemption* therefore indicates most strongly is not the meaning of Roth's desolation, but the existence of the context in which such a myth could have almost taken flight: the post-Holocaust, postmodern literary and critical paradigm where narratives—and especially myths and fables—are sometimes distrusted until they are marked by fracture or, to use Roth's term, "disabling discontinuity," at which point they can seem versions of one another, stable metonyms instead of the components of an audacious historical metaphor.

Stigman's Complaint

Ira Stigman, Roth's autobiographical writer-protagonist in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, is an occasionally brilliant armchair theorist of precisely this literary paradigm. Here he is, in true form, reflecting on the problem—the "baloney," as he puts it—of Joycean modernism:

> [W]hat I found most objectionable in Joyce, most repelling, was that he had brought
> to an extreme the divorce between the artist and the man; not merely brought to an
> extreme; he had flaunted it, gloried in it: the icon of the artist detached from his

autonomous work, disavowing moral responsibility for his creation, paring his nails

with divine indifference. Joyce had amputated the artist from the man. What baloney.

(*Diving Rock* 10)

It is hard to resist taking Stigman's many remarks on the disabling aspects of literary modernism and

the culture it propagated as Roth's own final explanation for the non-traditional contours of his

productivity narrative as a writer. Like Roth, Stigman is the author of a single published novel, after

which, he explains, he lost his ability to transform life into novelistic art and entered a period of

"years, long years of grievous depression and literary desuetude in Maine. These were the

interminable years of immobilization" (*DR* 114). Because Stigman looks so much like the Henry

Roth of popular myth, because he fulfills the expectation that a writer who disappeared from the

literary scene as spectacularly as Roth would have something to confess at the end of his life to

preserve his reputation, it is difficult to avoid taking him as a straightforward figure for Roth when

he strongly associates his "literary desuetude" with his early attraction to Joyce: "[T]he bastard is like

a literary black hole. You aren't meant to go on writing after that, after you've come in contact with

him" (*DR* 114). Stigman's diatribes against Joyce and the deceptive promise of the novel *Ulysses*

frequently have the atmosphere of autonomous critical essays; one scathing critique from *A Diving*

Rock on the Hudson would even be published on its own in *The Threepenny Review* in 1995 as "Railing

Against Joyce." They moreover reflect sentiments Roth actually did express in person. Notoriously,

when the University of New Mexico asked the author of modernist classic *Call It Sleep* to speak at a

Bloomsday event in 1981, Roth stunned the audience with a "barrage of complaints" against the

celebrated Irish author (Kellman 270).

But alongside the aspects of Stigman's character that appear to replicate Roth's personality,

Stigman is also responsible for making remarks in *Mercy of a Rude Stream* that are as destabilizing as

anything Roth identifies in Joyce in their effect on the reader's perception of Roth's actual history

and productivity narrative. As I have shown, his supposition that writers who struggle to produce second books earn their popularity because they share their "disabling discontinuity" with "the multitude" is extremely awkward when considered in the context of the volume in which it occurs, the third volume of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, which should have had the effect of dampening the resonance of the "universal chord" of Roth's legendary writer's block. Whether or not its appearance in *Mercy of a Rude Stream* represents a capitalization on the gullibility of the reading public and the critical establishment, the myth of Henry Roth is at the very least a deceptive phenomenon capable of concealing its own propagation. Joycean modernism may have constituted a disabling literary force because it "amputated the artist from the man," as Stigman puts it, but there is a possibility that Roth overcorrects the aesthetic trend, that he insists too freely, through Stigman, on the unity of the "artist" and the "man," and in the process further distorts public perception of his own peculiar career. Stigman's theories must be approached in full view of the structure of the novel in which he is contained, and with the assumption that Ira Stigman is not a novelized version of Henry Roth but is instead Henry Roth's figure for a certain kind of novelist.

Part of the difficulty of taking Stigman as Roth's figure emerges from the editorial division of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* into four volumes—*A Star Shines over Mt. Morris Park*, *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*, *From Bondage*, and *Requiem for Harlem*—which artificially gives the reader the impression that each volume is centered on a discrete period in the history of Stigman's youth. As Kellman suggests, "Publishing the individual volumes of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* serially, as installments, discouraged readers from seeing the work as a literary continuum, one that gathers momentum as the pages multiply" (328). These breaks between volumes significantly distract the reader from observing the contradictory nature of the second most obvious structural feature of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, the division of the text into two distinct temporal registers that never meet but nevertheless refer to the same protagonist. To illustrate the peculiarity of this narrative structure, perhaps they can be

artificially separated here. On the one hand there is the first and predominant register, the past-tense, third-person narration of Stigman's development, which makes up the bulk of the novel but is the only register to proceed linearly. This narrative begins with the Stigman family's move from the Lower East Side to Harlem at the beginning of World War I (Volume I), notoriously reveals Ira's incestuous relationships with both his sister and his cousin (Volume II), and then, in the final two volumes, tracks Ira's prolonged and tumultuous affair with Professor Edith Welles (based on Eda Lou Walton) and his discovery of modernism and literary life in Greenwich Village. These events correlate strongly with those of Henry Roth's own life, but they are fictional in the sense that Roth changes names and adds at least a few fabricated scenes, notably an incident where Stigman has a significant early sexual experience with a black prostitute in *A Diving Rock on the Hudson* (Kellman 68). He also distorts details for fictional effect, including the alleged intensity of the affair with his sister. As Kellman explains, "The actual incidents were neither as frequent nor as sordid as he would depict them in his final novels" (67). This primary temporal register is immensely stable nevertheless as a realistic narrative. It might have been published on its own as a lightly fictionalized, realistic autobiographical novel tracing the lines of Henry Roth's adolescence and early adulthood.

The second register, the fragmented narrative of how Ira Stigman's life story has come to be told, is very different structurally. This register consists of periodic interjections that pepper the entire four-volume novel—usually just a paragraph or two, but sometimes digressions that last for several pages—offered by a now elderly Stigman from his desk at a trailer park in New Mexico as he banters with "Ecclesias," the identity he imagines for the word processor that has allowed him to continue writing despite the crippling arthritis that has made it a struggle to hold a pen or press the stiff keys of a typewriter. These passages, which might be called the narrative-present or metanarrative register of the book, occur always in a different font from the developmental narrative and at irregular intervals. They moreover do not unfold linearly like the underlying narrative, but

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unpredictably; the passage of time between metanarrative segments is often unaccounted for by Stigman and difficult to track. Sometimes Stigman reflects on the present, on current events in his life and in the news in the first-person present tense: "Oh, the things that happen, Ecclesias, the things that happen, to me, to us, to my beloved wife and me, this 14th of January 1985, to our heirs, to our country, to Israel, the things that happen" (*Star Shines* 6). Other times he imagines Ecclesias's response, distinguishing it from his own thoughts with a Joycean dash: "—Well, salvage whatever you can, threadbare mementoes glimmering in recollection" (*SS* 52). Frequently a passage will describe Stigman's reaction to a moment in the primary narrative in the process of writing or editing it, as if to capture an intellectual and emotional portrait of the writer at work: "Once again it came to Ira, as he sat recording the incident: how sad" (*SS* 129). Notice how Roth also feels free to refer to Ira in the third-person past tense, suggesting the presence of an additional narrative layer. If the primary developmental narrative of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* seems like proof that Henry Roth abandoned modernist experimentation after *Call It Sleep* for linearity and realism, then the complexities of the novel's metanarrative register, which frequently feels like an artificial feature Roth grafts inexplicably into his novel, significantly threaten that possibility.

Even more difficult to account for are the few bewildering instances where the division of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* into volumes, and with it the external publication history of the novel, is mentioned or otherwise called attention to in the Albuquerque metanarrative. Take for example this disorienting reference, which takes place thirty-five pages into Volume II, just after Stigman's remarks in the primary New York narrative about how he nearly killed himself at the lowest point of his adolescence after he was caught stealing pens and expelled from Stuyvesant High School. Roth writes, "That was to be the original ending of Volume I of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, so he [Ira] had signified on the disk on which he kept a skeleton outline of the contents of the sections into which his work was divided" (*FB* 35). Neither Stigman nor the third-person external narrator have said

anything thus far about the publication process of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* because, as he asserts even

late in Volume Four, he is still drafting it ("he still has to tackle seventy-five or a hundred pages of

narrative before he can lay claim to having completed a second draft" (*RH* 244)). Yet almost any

reader who would have purchased Volume II of the novel probably has in his possession a copy of

Volume I, which Ira here mentions inside the world of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* without flinching, as if

the presence of the text of a draft of a novel inside the pages of the published novel it also

constitutes does not pose a massive threat to that novel's narratological stability. In a puzzling

gesture, Roth at once asserts the textuality of the predominant developmental narrative by referring

to a draft Stigman calls "Volume I of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*" and denies the real historical event of

the publication of *A Star Shines over Mt. Morris Park*, which *is* Volume I of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.[54]

What all this suggests is that to call *Mercy of a Rude Stream* an autobiographical novel, a novel

tracking chronologically a loosely fictionalized version of Henry Roth's life from some determined

origin to some determined endpoint, and to call it particularly an autobiographical novel in which

Roth attempts to resolve the problem of his perceived writer's block, is to misidentify the book. In

Mercy of a Rude Stream the reader encounters instead a novel about the relationship between the linear

autobiographical memoir of the early adulthood of Ira Stigman and a highly unstable representation

of the space in which such a memoir might have been composed. Ira Stigman is a figure who

strongly resembles Henry Roth in his intelligence, neuroses, and personal history. Like Roth, late in

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[54] The peculiarity of Roth's gesture might be illustrated by comparing it to what may be the earliest example of novelistic textual reflexivity: the relationship between Books I and II of *Don Quixote*. The status of the running Albuquerque metanarrative is as complex as Book II of *Don Quixote*, where Book I has already been published, both literally and inside the world of Cervantes's novel or proto-novel, and has begun to complicate significantly how Don Quixote is received on his misadventurous sallies; the populace knows the delusional knight, knows how to react to him, and begins to take advantage of him. But in the case of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* the two narratives do not follow one another in sequence, but alternate; they are intertwined. The text complicating the life of the elderly Ira Stigman is moreover merely a draft, it has been published in the real world but has not been published inside the fictional world of the novel, although the specter of having one's life disrupted by a published text looms over him as the presumed author of the fictional analogue to *Call It Sleep*. In *Don Quixote*, the presence of Book I inside Book II heightens the book's formal realism by presenting a network of intertextual reference and ramification so intricate they seem too infallible to be fiction. In the metanarrative of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, the conflation of the primary developmental narrative of the novel with the draft of the novel generates a peculiar hollowness, an occasion to question Stigman's integrity as an author and, as a consequence, to reconsider Roth.

life and with a high-level of self-consciousness, he engages in the writing and editing of a narrative about the years leading up to the composition of his first novel. At the same time—and here is where protagonist and author strongly diverge—Stigman, unlike Roth, is unambiguously *no longer a novelist*. Instead, he is a character drafting and redrafting his memoir, a point he makes off-handedly early in *A Star Shines over Mt. Morris Park*, while the reader is still trying to work out the meaning of the shifts between narrative registers, by describing what "should" have happened after the publication of his first, successful book. Roth writes, unambiguously, "It should have gone into a novel, several novels perhaps, written in early manhood, and his first—*and only*—work of fiction. There should have followed novels written in the maturity gained by that first novel" (52, emphasis mine). And later, in *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*: "As he wrote his literary agent: he would refrain from submitting further fragments of his writing. It was all or nothing now, and if it was to be all, then it would have to be posthumous" (42). When Ira Stigman supposes in *From Bondage* that the story of his life struck a "universal chord" in its "disabling discontinuity," he may be liable for propagating the cultural myth of the silent writer against the integrity of the text that will render that myth, for him, null. But he is also several steps behind Roth; he has not published two volumes of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, nor is he writing a novel at all but is working on the draft of his memoir. Compared to the ultimately prolific Henry Roth, who embraced his public persona at the end of his life in his return to novel-writing, Ira Stigman is a solipsistic hack who does not expect his final memoir to be published, at least not before his death.

To put it another way, *Mercy of a Rude Stream* is not Henry Roth's final, vaguely fictionalized autobiography. Instead it is Henry Roth's highly autobiographical final novel that offers a fictional vision of a novelist who, after composing and publishing a novel in his young adulthood, never manages to write another and turns, late in life, to two related tasks: the composition of a morally realistic memoir—a memoir not unlike the journals Roth kept during at least some of his supposedly

silent years—and a prolonged exchange with his word processor. *Mercy of a Rude Stream* may be a

thematic autobiography, but formally it is Henry Roth's novel about a novelist who has ceased to

write and perhaps to be able to write novels. Reduced to its most basic structure, the book is not

Roth's novelistic resolution of his myth, nor is it an abstract, psychological novel. Rather, it is a

novel taking on the myth and its propagation as its subject, a novel *about* a spectacularly blocked

American writer. When Stigman rails against Joyce and modernism, when he speculates about the

discontinuities of the twentieth century, he does so not only as Roth's paradoxical spokesman, the

proclaimer of Roth's "universal chord" inside the novel that will dampen it upon publication. He

becomes also, in the context of the structure of his unusual novelistic container, a theoretical figure

who resides, and fortunately for us writes and speaks, albeit to himself, within the hollow interior of

a cultural myth.

In this sense Stigman is very different from a character such as Philip Roth's Alexander

Portnoy, who also seems to speak within a stereotype, in his case a Jewish American protagonist

who reveals in a torrent his self-loathing and sexual repression on a figurative psychoanalyst's couch.

The other Roth's similarly manic, wildly digressive protagonist does not simply inhabit or symbolize

a cultural myth, he embodies it. Portnoy, who is not a writer-figure but a character who offers what

is essentially a book-length dramatic monologue to his psychoanalyst (who never responds until the

novel's final line) is thus able to raise both thematic questions about the stereotype he signifies and

formal questions about the genre of the novel and what it can support. Through *Portnoy's Complaint*,

Philip Roth jokes that the cliché of the psychoanalytic patient monologue bears such a close relation

to the modern novelistic convention of stream-of-consciousness, psychological narrative that it

might as well constitute the text of a novel. Alexander Portnoy in this way both expresses and is an

expression of the aesthetic that generated him; he raises the question of the relationship between the

logic of the postmodern literary paradigm in which he occurs and the logic of the cultural mythology

he inhabits. Ira Stigman, on the other hand, may vividly express the causes and logic of the myth of the one-book novelist in the twentieth-century, he may cogently argue that his paralysis was an effect, at least in part, of contact with Joycean modernism, but, since unlike Henry Roth he is no longer a novelist but rather the author of a draft of a memoir, he cannot be taken seriously as the theorist of the novelistic aesthetic containing him. Whereas *Portnoy's Complaint* is a contained psychological novel attended by the contradictions that form relies upon—the title of the book at once describes Portnoy's psychological complex, his long narrative to his psychoanalyst that is the text of the novel, and directs the reader to Philip Roth's contained aesthetic comment—Stigman's complaint is a part of a larger aesthetic drama that does not find its resolution in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. Stigman can rail against Joyce as much as he likes, he can even do so in the same formulations as his author and in the experiential vocabulary of a personal history almost identical to that of the real writer Henry Roth, but, as a character inscribed in the world of a novel that strongly denies its own existence by insisting that most of its text is a draft in progress, he cannot will himself into a new aesthetic.

How, then, do we finally understand Ira Stigman's complaint about modernism? And how do we understand the aesthetic identity of Roth's gesture in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, however unwittingly it might have taken shape? Consider the following instance in *From Bondage*, where Stigman offers what is probably his most lucid critique of the narrative strategies he identifies as Joyce's attempt deal with the problem of history in the twentieth century. Here is Roth on Stigman on Joyce:

> His disaffection with Joyce had been slow indeed, for at first he had regarded this book [*Ulysses*] rapturously, his irritation growing at first imperceptibly, yet over sixty years later to reach this crescendo of loathing. Such was his disavowal of the greatest seminal work of English literature of the twentieth century. *Ulysses* had become to

him an evasion of history; its author *resolved* to perceive nothing of the continuing

evolution of Ireland, refusing to discover anything latent within the seeming inane of

a day in 1904. History may have been a nightmare, but the ones who could have

awakened him were the very ones he eschewed: his folk.

> The man loathed, the man quailed before change—that was the crux of Ira's
>
> present aversion to his quondam idol. The book was the work of a man who sought
>
> to fossilize his country, its land, its people, to rob them of their future, arrest their
>
> ebullient coursing life, their traditions and aspirations. (*FB* 67, emphasis original)

Inside the represented world of *Mercy of a Rude Stream,* Stigman's critique is provocative but stable.

According to Stigman, whatever Joyce might have attained in terms of literary virtuosity he

purchased by severing himself, both literally in his self-imposed exile from Ireland and in the

structure of his most famous novel, from the evolving historical world that enabled *Ulysses* to be

written. Whereas Stephen Dedalus might have someday developed enough as a writer and

intellectual to compose *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, no one in the world of *Ulysses*, in

Stigman's perception, not even Dedalus, was ever going to grow up to write *Ulysses*: such a text has

nothing to do with growing up at all, but with the embrace of a discontinuous vector between the

imagined world of one's fiction and the historical world out of which it grew and in which it was

written.

Joyce's aesthetic moreover had, in Stigman's perception, a profoundly disruptive effect on

the cultural life of its American followers, especially its young adherents. For the young Ira living

away from Jewish family life for the first time among the Village literati, the copies of *Ulysses*

smuggled from Europe were a source of intrigue and seeming proof of new literary possibility. But

the modernist aesthetic also made demands. *Ulysses* helped to open, in its vast influence as "the very

paradigm of the kind of severance it was incumbent on every genuine artist to do whose goal was

greatness" (*FB* 68), a new literary model under which the pursuit of enabling rupture would become for subsequent novelists not just an aesthetic but a personal imperative to repaint also one's daily existence and cultural identity in discontinuous modern strokes. Stigman, for all the modernist virtuosity he apparently exhibited in his artful first novel, would fail to achieve this in his life and find himself permanently disrupted by the attempt. His expectation that it would be possible to move by way of one's art "from a specific people to a universal one, from the parochial to the cosmopolitan" (*FB* 68), was, for him as a Jew, increasingly impossible to intellectually rationalize and execute. As a Jewish writer, Stigman seems to conclude in *Mercy*, to have encountered modernism's embrace of discontinuous cultural narratives was to be forced, maybe not at first but eventually, into a truly disabling choice: toward or away from a "reunion" with one's people, which, in the post-Holocaust world that would begin less than a decade after the composition of Stigman's early novelistic success, could seem a choice between Diaspora and Israel.[55]

Stigman does not realize that rejecting modernism unwittingly reproduces and participates in one of its most basic structures. Consider again Stigman's clearest articulation of his thesis against Joyce: "History may have been a nightmare, but the ones who could have awakened him were the very ones he eschewed: his folk." The line is a clever revision of what is probably the most frequently cited sentence in *Ulysses,* which occurs in Nestor, "—History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (34). But in his haste to respond to Joyce, Stigman elides a context that significantly complicates the meaning of his gesture—in fact it nullifies it—and

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[55] This is a point Ezra Cappell makes in slightly different terms in his extensive remarks on Roth in *American Talmud*, a study exploring late twentieth-century American Jewish writing as a traceable extension of traditions in rabbinical commentary. Cappell writes, "Roth's first novel is less a Jewish novel than an *anti*-Jewish novel. While recent Jewish American fiction, through a reacquaintance with Jewish texts, has been marked by an embracing of traditional Jewish law and culture, I believe Roth's first novel stands as a pillar of opposition to that continuity; it is precisely these Jewish texts that are parodied and mocked throughout *Call It Sleep.* If a culture must be about continuity and must be text centered, then Roth's first novel fails on both scores. Modernism embraces discontinuity, rupture, the turning of one's artistic back on a culture, all in the hope of reinventing a new culture from new artistic materials" (29). For Cappell, too, only in the underappreciated *Mercy of a Rude Stream* does Roth find a stable aesthetic for the representation of Jewish American cultural experience.

moreover does so in lieu of perceiving Joyce's historical representation of Jewish history in Ireland, a

current in the novel that has been widely addressed.[56] As Joyce critics have frequently observed,

Dedalus's line occurs in direct response to Mr. Deasy's Irish nationalism, which he offers in a

strongly anti-Semitic formulation: "—Mark my words, Mr Dedalus, he said. England is in the hands

of the jews [sic]. In all the highest places: her finance, her press. And they are the signs of a nation's

decay" (33). As Marilyn Reizbaum claims, Deasy's remarks reflect Joyce's awareness and possible

critique of the opinions of Sinn Fein leader Arthur Griffith, and more generally of

> the peculiar split in sentiment [in Ireland] toward the Jew. Griffith believed (at least
>
> initially) that the Zionist Jew, in representing the Jewish people, was to be applauded,
>
> for Zionism was equated with nationalism, a cause that the leader of Sinn Fein would
>
> support; on the other hand, the Jew's image in Ireland or in any other country…was
>
> that of the parasitic outsider, who exploited in order to survive. (105)

Dedalus's famous remark may represent a turning away from the debates of Jewish history that

would become, after World War Two, as difficult for a historically attentive, post-Holocaust,

American Jew such as Stigman to accept as they might have been for a pre-independence Irish

nationalist trying to rationalize his own political ideology in the context of Ireland's suddenly rising

Jewish population.[57] It nevertheless occurs as an attempt by Joyce to openly engage the matter, and

one that does not seem to represent a corresponding turning away on Joyce's part since the primary

character of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, is a Jew who, as Reizbaum also suggests, participates in a

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[56] It may not seem entirely fair to judge Stigman for his lack of familiarity with contemporary critical trends, but Roth does explicitly suggest an interest in classic criticism on Stigman's part. In Volume II of *Mercy*, Ira is reading Stuart Gilbert's well-known study *James Joyce's* Ulysses.

[57] According to Reizbaum, "the facts are that in 1871 the Jewish population in all of Ireland was 285, in 1881, 453; by the year 1904, the estimate was 3,371, most of them residing in Dublin (2,200). The sudden influx at the turn of the century resulted from a wave of immigration, primarily from Russia, where Jewish persecution had become acute. (104)

compelling, full-scale dramatization of precisely this cultural problem in subsequent chapters.[58] Stigman's rejection of Joyce on these grounds thus constitutes a deeply ironic misreading of *Ulysses*. On the one hand, Stigman rejects Joycean modernism as the aesthetic that could not sustain him as a Jew because it seemed to force him toward a choice between his own culture and progressive dissolution into some notion of a universal Western civilization. He offers his rejection, however, in literal response to an analogous rejection inside the world of *Ulysses*; Stephen Dedalus wishes to "awake" from an Irish history that seems to force him toward an uncannily similar choice. Stigman thus rejects Dedalus's rejection of an Irish history that rejects the Jews the Irish resemble. To awake from history here is simply to participate in a sequence of impulsive rejections of history— repressions might be a better word—and likely to open oneself to an inevitable revisitation by whatever it was one sought to escape.

It is not necessary for the critic to make the same mistake. Just as James Joyce is not the fictional character Stephen Dedalus, Henry Roth is not Ira Stigman. Roth's portrayal of Stigman's rejection of modernism in *Mercy of a Rude Stream* therefore frees Roth from modernist aesthetics no more than Joyce's portrayal of Stephen Dedalus's rejection of the "nightmare" of history frees Joyce, finally, from historical commentary, which Reizbaum and others have obviously managed to reconstitute from the text of Joyce's immensely opaque novel. Like Dedalus, Stigman remains readable as a figure for a historical crisis of ideas, and *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, despite the ambitions of its central, strongly anti-modernist character, does not mark Roth's escape from the paradigm of literary modernism so much as confirm his place in a continuing struggle over how to manage history in novelistic discourse. Harry Girling shrewdly formulates the final aesthetic of *Ulysses* in the context of the questions it raises relating to Jewish history like this: "The most that James Joyce

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[58]For Reizbaum, the epicenter of the paradoxes of Jewish identity in *Ulysses* is the Cyclops chapter. That is where the "nightmare and its resonances within the Irish setting are vividly dramatized…in the encounter between Bloom and the (at least) visually impaired Citizen" as "a clash of tropes" (110).

seems willing to say is that Leopold [Bloom] survives as part of the history that makes the nightmare from which the twentieth century is trying to awake" (112). The most Roth seems willing to say, similarly, is that Stigman, who is a dramatization of the myth of Henry Roth, survives as part of the literary modernism that makes the literary paradigm from which Roth, and undoubtedly others, have been trying to awake. Whatever literary historical awakening Ira Stigman manages in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, in other words, takes place in the pages of the fiction in which he is contained, and suggests the continuity of Roth's intellectual struggle with modernism from the biographical moment when it engendered *Call It Sleep*—across the many years associated with his supposed block—to the moment when it engendered, with no less force, *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.

In the AJHS Henry Roth archives, the first-pass galleys for *A Star Shines over Mt. Morris Park* offer scholars and biographers working on Roth a rare opportunity: in the margins of the first several dozen pages, they offer a chance to see what Roth's handwriting looked like during the final years of his life, after arthritis had immobilized him so badly that he could neither compose with a pen nor push the keys on a standard typewriter. Not surprisingly, the tenacious Roth mediated the problem remarkably well by learning in his seventy-ninth year how to use a word processor in order to continue his writing and by relying on the assistance of several undergraduates from the University of New Mexico, most notably Felicia Steele, who would be Roth's devoted, live-in assistant for several years. For whatever reason, when Roth was given these particular proofs, he began to make the corrections with his own hand. Most of them have been doubled by a third-party interpreter of Roth's handwriting, but Roth's correction to the title page of the volume stands out: to the sleek typescript "A Star over Mt. Morris Park" Roth indicates the insertion of the word "Shines" in wobbly, barely-legible letters. The characters could be those of a child. And they could not contrast more with the confidence of the opening sentences of the final, published novel, where Roth reaches across the better part of a century into his memory, across a period of time longer than

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even the grandest formulations of the myth of his silence, to the first year of the First World War: "Midsummer. The three incidents would always be associated in his mind, more durably, more prominently than anything else during that summer of 1914, his first summer in Harlem" (3). There can be no doubt Henry Roth depended upon the technological advancements of the twentieth century to write *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. This is a point Roth makes no effort to hide in his novel, where he speculates openly on Stigman's relationship to his computer in *A Diving Rock on the Hudson*: "[I]f anything ever came of this long, long opus, anything worthwhile, it would be owing in large part to the work of multitudes of men and women who, without fanfare, matter-of-factly, had perfected and assembled this instrument (and continued to improve it). They were liberators of the mind" (361). At the end of his life, it is clear Roth knew the difference between life and art that his biographers and critics sometimes too easily elide. But like Joyce he also depended on another instrument, the genre of the novel, as the stage for the intellectual awakening he managed to achieve. Readers and critics of Henry Roth have the responsibility to recognize the myth of Roth's silence not as the history of Roth's life, but as an American cultural myth in the same category as the modernist myth of history as a form of sleep from which it is possible to awaken. Roth's final autobiographical novel is, in the first place, a version of the myth. It is by no coincidence that the book is a specimen of a literary genre that has been always in the business of obscuring human labor and staging awakenings.

IV. UNBLOCKING RALPH ELLISON: IN "TROUBLE" WITH HUCK

The case of Ralph Ellison is the keystone of this study on American literary production for a number of interrelated reasons. One of them is the singular prominence of Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, which remains one of the most widely read and widely taught twentieth-century American novels. The book was a success in its own time, it has never been out of print, and it remains a work of great insight and controversy. Compared to the other supposedly "blocked" writers I address, Ellison continues to be the subject of vigorous, active scholarly debate, and from a broad range of critical and theoretical perspectives. If Ellison had died shortly after publishing *Invisible Man*, instead of forty-two years later in 1994, it is possible to imagine that his legacy would not be terribly different from what it is today. This is true even if the immediate political relevance of *Invisible Man*, its status as an audacious meditation on American racial misunderstanding, has declined, as Kenneth Warren has suggested, with the difficult to measure progress of integration.[59] *Invisible Man* is a work that has taken on a life of its own in a way that very few books ever do, and it is the pillar of Ellison's canonical position regardless of the work that did or did not follow. As Timothy Parrish explains, "Cervantes is remembered as the author of *Don Quixote*; Twain is remembered as the author of *Huckleberry Finn*; Ellison will be remembered as the author of *Invisible Man*" (xi).

Unlike many of the other authors I address in this study, in other words, Ellison's major work enjoyed a high enough cultural profile that critical preoccupation with the author's subsequent inability or unwillingness to publish another book-length work of fiction was not inevitable. For instance, neither of what may be the two most illuminating monographs on Ellison and *Invisible Man* preceding the recent release of the new edition of Ellison's manuscripts (*Three Days Before the Shooting*) (2010), Warren's *So Black and Blue* (2003) and Barbara Foley's *Wrestling with the Left* (2010), is blind to

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[59] See Warren, Kenneth. *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism.* Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003.

the anomaly of Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* fictional production. Yet both studies take on the project

of historicizing *Invisible Man* in the context of rapidly changing political realities in the US without

delving into much speculation regarding the second novel or Ellison's non-production. For Warren,

in fact, "it was largely because [Ellison] was identified with *one* novel that his critical and political

writings could take the shape that they did" (21). Foley even claims that reading *Invisible Man* through

"the palimpsest supplied by Ellison's writings after 1952" can be a "circular practice," opting

deliberately to "read forward to *Invisible Man*" through Ellison's draft materials and earlier published

writings (6). For both of these critics, *Invisible Man* is the apex of Ellison's achievement, and a

sensation of such magnitude and controversy that it is far more important to trace the rise of that

novel, and to chart its impact, than it is to speculate on the meaning of Ellison's subsequent, less

certain post-*Invisible Man* production. This is true even though both Warren and Foley had access to

and presumably read *Juneteenth* (1999), the excerpt from Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* manuscripts

edited by John F. Callahan. This volume, although it has attracted a significant amount of

commentary from scholars of Ellison's work, has not become required reading for the literary critic

who wishes to approach Ellison. Warren only discusses *Juneteenth* briefly in the epilogue to his

volume; Foley, who works extensively with Ellison's unpublished materials, only mentions it in

passing. Likewise, neither of the two major Ellison biographies addresses the question of the post-

Invisible Man production in any detail. The earlier biography, Lawrence Jackson's *Ralph Ellison:*

Emergence of Genius (2002) ends with the publication of *Invisible Man* and Ellison's 1952 National

Book Award (the volume concludes with this final line: "Ellison had capped his career with a life

work" (444)). Arnold Rampersad covers Ellison's life from birth to death in *Ralph Ellison: A*

Biography (2007), but he barely addresses Ellison's second novelistic gesture, an omission that has

attracted some controversy. But while Adam Bradley feels that Rampersad's apparent indifference to

the second book in his "otherwise meticulous" biography is a serious omission (15),[60] it represents the critical status quo. If Rampersad "telescopes the last three decades of Ellison's life, the most prolific period of the second novel's composition, into only five chapters out of a total of twenty-one" (Bradley 15), he does so because *Invisible Man* remains central in Ellison's career.

Ellison also stands out in this study because of the nature of his post-*Invisible Man* life, which, although it produced no finished second novel, was by all accounts an illustrious career as a public intellectual, an advocate for the arts, and an insightful critic and theorist of literature. From conversations the author had with friends and interviewers, of course, it was well known throughout the sixties and seventies, and up until the moment of the writer's death, that Ellison was working on a new book. He published eight excerpts from this project between 1960 and 1977, which modestly satisfied readers and assured them that there was a work-in-progress somewhere, however overdue it might be. But Ellison also published a large number of essays, which he collected in the two volumes *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986). These were both influential, acclaimed collections. As Eric J. Sundquist has put it, they not only help establish Ellison as "the most acute analyst of the American riddle of race," but they make him "one of the most important essayists of the modern world" (228). For Alan Nadel, likewise, Ellison's meditations on American literature were cogent enough that they could supposedly "unite a monograph of literary criticism, were Ellison to have published his criticism in academic rather than journalistic genres" (398). Henry Roth, to whom Ellison is frequently compared on the basis of the multiple decades that passed between his books, understandably attracted skepticism for the array of alternate careers he pursued

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[60] Bradley: "More striking than what Rampersad's biography includes about the second novel, however, is what it does not. Nowhere does Rampersad attempt to reconstruct the stages of the second novel's composition, explore the central themes, or provide any more than a perfunctory description of its plot and characters. Nowhere does he note that Ellison became one of the first major authors to adopt the personal computer as his primary means of composition. Nowhere does he communicate the idea, so vivid in Ellison's private notes and even in his public interviews, that Ellison considered himself to be writing a novel that would achieve 'the aura of summing up,' describing the nation to itself in the language of fiction" (*Ralph Ellison in Progress* 16). Parrish, too, worries that Rampersad "treats *Invisible Man* as if it were a brilliant anomaly in an otherwise sad story about a black man who lost his way upon reaching the bight lights of American life" (4).

after the success of *Call It Sleep*: precision tool-grinder, poultry farmer, mental hospital janitor, to re-recite the most unusual of the writer's odd-jobs. Roth's story is, as we have seen, a subtler thing than the straightforward narrative of decline or block it has sometimes seemed, but it was a by all accounts a departure from public literary life. Ellison's illustrious résumé could hardly be more different: a National Book Award (1953), a fellowship at the American Academy in Rome (1955-1957); visiting scholar positions at Bard College (1957-1961), the University of Chicago (1961), and Rutgers University (1962-4); membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1964); Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University (1970-1980). By 1965, when Henry Roth was still thawing from his years in rural Maine with the rerelease and long delayed commercial success of *Call It Sleep*, which was claimed retrospectively in the sixties as a classic of Jewish American fiction after thirty years of neglect, Ellison had already received an invitation from Lyndon B. Johnson to visit the White House. This was so even though Ellison had not published a new book-length fiction in twelve years. The momentum of *Invisible Man* was such that it remained the engine of Ellison's career for the rest of his life, not to mention a perennial source of income. A single book gave Ellison the rarest type of literary authority, that of the fiction writer whose work is of such cultural significance that he becomes authorized to speak as a critic and recognized with a string of honorary degrees (in Ellison's case, from Tuskegee, Rutgers, Williams, Harvard, and Wesleyan (Lutz 45-6)).

Specifically, Ellison has held a special status in American letters for his conscious engagement of the fundamental contradiction of race in American culture, where the US has always been far more integrated socially, politically, and philosophically than it is willing to admit. As Nadel puts it concisely, the core of Ellison's task as a novelist is "to present the segregated world while exposing the myth of segregation by demonstrating an infinite network of connections" (400). Somewhat counterintuitively, this does not make Ellison a straightforward representative of

twentieth-century, modernist literature, through which he is often approached by readers, but rather a conscious heir to an older American tradition, to "the writers of antebellum America who saw the Negro as a moral burden, a symbol of the dream deferred, a sign of the immanent chaos that would test whether any nation so conceived and so dedicated could endure" (398). The best recognized examples of this are probably the references to nineteenth-century authors in *Invisible Man*, including an epigraph drawn from Herman Melville's novella *Benito Cereno*, Ellison's decision to name the one of the businessmen Invisible Man pursues upon his arrival in New York "Mr. Emerson," and a reference by Mr. Emerson's son to *Adventures* of *Huckleberry Finn* in his conversation with Invisible Man (187-8). Ellison's remarks in essays such as "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" (1953), "Society, Morality, and the Novel" (1957), and "The World and the Jug" (1963/1964) regarding the twentieth-century effacement of the moral dimension in American literature, and the unwillingness among many American writers and critics to confront difficult cultural and historical problems, also strongly confirm him as an outspoken critic willing to intervene in American literary historical debate.

As a representative of African American literature specifically, Ellison's position has been somewhat more problematic—and sometimes for exactly the reasons why he made an impact on American literature in general—although his centrality in that critical category as a problem to be confronted is also assured. Unlike Roth, who published his most important work *Call It Sleep* three decades before the moment in the 1960s when writers (such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth) and critics (including Leslie Fiedler and Alfred Kazin) codified Jewish American literature as a coherent critical category, and who would only be claimed retrospectively, Ellison emerged after the African American literary flowering of the Harlem Renaissance, and he clearly engaged and benefitted from the thriving literary culture that movement fostered. Along with his contemporaries James Baldwin and Richard Wright, his work became part of the growing

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momentum of the Civil Rights movement, in Ellison's case through the figure of Invisible Man's struggle to negotiate the paradoxes of a racially divided society. But Ellison would become increasingly controversial during the 1960s and 1970s, when his engagement of mainstream American literary culture, in particular his "acceptance of white writers as standards and influences" (Warren 18), would seem suspicious to some, in particular to members of the Black Arts movement.[61]

Ellison's controversial status as a representative of African American literature derives also from his conception of the writer's autonomy, and of the autonomy of all inclinations of artistic response, which could seem antithetical to the call for racial solidarity demanded by political protest. In an essay written at the very apex of the Civil Rights movement, for example, Ellison unexpectedly lumps himself with Wright and Baldwin, with whom he often had fierce aesthetic disputes regarding the political function of the novel, on the basis that they were all, in the first place, writers rather than *black* writers: "[Wright] was as much a product of his reading as of his painful experiences, and he made himself a writer by subjecting himself to the writer's discipline—as he understood it. The same is true of James Baldwin, who is not the product of a Negro store-front church but of the library, and the same is true of me" ("World" 116). For Ellison, literary dedication was "indivisible,"[62] and as such it could transcend political and cultural difference, even during the intense controversies of the 1960s. Through claims like his remark about himself and Baldwin, Ellison plays something like American literature's Marcel Proust, who insisted in the essay "Contre Sanite-Beueve" that "a book is the product of a different *self* from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our vices" (100, italics original). A similar belief in a book-producing "self" apart

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[61] Although, as Warren points out, even in that context Ellison had his friends. Despite mistrusting Ellison's politics, Larry Neal, an influential Black Aesthetician, would concede the presence of "'a clear, definite sense of cultural nationalism at work' in Ellison's thinking that ought to be acknowledged" (qtd. 17).

[62] As James A. McPherson points out in his collaborative interview-essay "Indivisible Man," for Ellison literary response depends upon being receptive to comingling of the high and the low (371).

is at the core of the controversy of Ellison as African American author. Offering a literary

worldview where writers as diverse in their aesthetic and political objectives as Baldwin, Wright, and

himself could be united *a priori* as "writers" at the moment of the American Civil Rights movement,

and on the basis of time spent in the universalizing "library" rather than the particularizing "Negro

store-front church," it is not difficult to see why Ellison would elicit such mixed, sometimes

vituperative responses from writers and critics attempting to map African American literature as a

necessary counter-movement to mainstream American literary culture.[63] Without even flinching,

Ellison pitches himself as part of a group of three writers who are usually considered pillars of the

mid-twentieth-century African American canon, and who hold very different aesthetic assumptions,

as if they were all representatives of literature in general on the basis of their embrace of the

"library" and the writer's "discipline." The prospect that they may be bound also by shared ethnic

identity is, for Ellison, surplus.

In *So Black and Blue*, however, Warren reminds us that it is important to remember that in

Invisible Man Ellison was working through the very paradoxes attending the canonical placement of

book, and that his objective was to at once describe and undermine a cultural reality ground in the

mill of Jim Crow, of which the category African American literature, as Warren suggests at length

elsewhere,[64] may itself also be an expression. Reading the book six decades after its publication, the

extent to which it still speaks to us—or speaks "for" us, to deploy the famous language of *Invisible

Man*'s final question (581)—is the extent to which a Jim Crow reality remains. As Warren explains,

the US is still collectively "working…to make Ellison's novel a story of the world that was, and less

an account of the world that still is. Success here just might be a bad thing for *Invisible Man*, but such

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[63] To capture just one instance of the extreme response Ellison could provoke in this context, here is a 1952 response to *Invisible Man* by John O. Killens: "how does Ellison represent the Negro people? The thousands of exploited farmers in the South are represented by a sharecropper who has made both wife and daughter pregnant. The main character of the book is a young Uncle Tom who is obsessed with getting to the 'top' by pleasing the Big, Rich White folks…The Negro people need Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* like we need a hole in the head or a stab in the back." (qtd. in Cruse 235).
[64] See Warren, Kenneth. *What Was African American Literature?* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011.

a success would be a marvelous thing, indeed" (108). In this final line of *So Black and Blue*, Warren proposes that *Invisible Man* is becoming a litmus test for the progress of successful integration through the organic process by which any literary text becomes historical. This may be a "bad thing for *Invisible Man*" as a document that speaks to and undermines present sociopolitical and psychological realities; increasingly it may require both historical knowledge and imagination for *Invisible Man* to speak to, or for, its reader. But if reading *Invisible Man* becomes more and more like reading Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels,* Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, or Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, allegorical texts which rely upon knowledge of specific historical data in order to signify, that may be the greatest case of all for the novel's canonical importance.

When Ellison died in 1994, his literary career was complete in a way that few modern writers have experienced. He enjoyed a monumental literary success when he was still relatively young, and on the basis of his first achievement he was propelled into a comfortable life as a prominent public intellectual. During his lifetime, and since his death, Ellison's estimation among critics shifted with the profound postwar transformations that took place in the halls of the American academy, as well as in American politics and culture in general. But even if Warren is correct about *Invisible Man* belonging to the logic of Jim Crow, Ellison's final importance is probably assured. *Invisible Man* may become a relic of a bygone, troubling reality, and thus more difficult to imaginatively enter and inhabit, but the novel's contextualized negotiation of its reality will remain a site of scholarly and popular interest (not unlike antebellum American literature, or, as I will discuss later in this chapter, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, in which Ellison took a special interest). For now, and for the foreseeable future, it is accordingly possible to enter critical debate regarding Ellison without necessarily addressing the question of his productivity, even as that debate addresses increasingly the obsolescence of Ellison's aesthetic and his political ideology.

This is precisely why Ellison is central to this study. To a much greater degree than the other authors I address here (with the exception of Philip Roth), the cultural myth of block has *not yet* significantly reshaped—that is to say significantly enhanced or damaged—Ellison's position as a canonical reference point. This is true even as rumors have circulated widely. Since as early as 1974, Ellison has been compared to Henry Roth on the basis of the very long delay following the publication of his first novel.[65] Yet because Ellison's canonical position is so strongly tied *a priori* to his famous first book, speculations regarding his productivity *as such* have, until now, taken a secondary position to descriptions of his interventions as a theorist of American politics and culture. But with critics such as Warren now historicizing the decline of *Invisible Man*'s political currency, and with the 2010 release of *Three Days Before the Shooting,* the long-promised expanded edition of Ellison's unpublished manuscript, as well as two revisionist histories of the Ellison story—Bradley's *Ralph Ellison in Progress: From* Invisible Man *to* Three Days Before the Shooting, and Parrish's *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America*—this may be changing.

As we have seen, block myths have the ability to powerfully restructure literary biography. Henry Roth concealed his own remarkable, late productivity in plain sight by writing a massive multi-volume narrative *about* a writer overcoming writer's block. In the case of Joseph Mitchell, notably, assumptions regarding the impact of homeless eccentric Joe Gould on the subsequent production of Mitchell refigured Mitchell's most successful, innovative work as a harrowing encounter with moral oblivion and, in effect, a mistake. Largely, Ellison has been spared this kind of speculation. Because Ellison's position in the American canon is an edifice built on the importance of *Invisible Man*, and because Ellison's literary historical and political stature has been marked as an affair of decline quite on its own by the decreasing immediacy of his political philosophy, attempts to address his productivity as such have thus far usually marked parallel or secondary, rather than

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[65] See Shenker, Israel. "2nd Heller Book Due 13 Years After First." *New York Times* 18 Feb. 1974. 30.

predominant, ways of reading the Ellison story. To demonstrate how this has worked in one relatively well-known example, Norman Podhoretz's often cited *Commentary* essay "What Happened to Ralph Ellison" (1999), written on the occasion of the release of *Juneteenth*, unambiguously registers Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* production as an affair of "block." Here is Podhoretz's portrait of Ellison's unpublished novel:

> It now appears that by the time Ellison died about five years ago, the still unfinished manuscript consisted of some 2,000 pages in all. At one point, around 1970, he had considered publishing the whole thing in three volumes, but then changed his mind because he wanted each volume to "have a compelling interest in itself," which, he feared, would not be the case. And so, for the next 24 years, he continued to write and expand and revise without ever completing the book to his own satisfaction.
>
> This may not exactly seem like a block—a word that conjures up the inability to write at all—but it is one of the forms that a block can sometimes take. I know of a novelist who turned out several hundred thousand words without—or rather to avoid—coming to the end, and I would guess that something similar was involved in Ellison's 2,000 pages. (54).

Podhoretz's terms here are imprecise and contradictory in the way that is characteristic of discussions of "block." Shooting from the hip with a "guess," he psychoanalyzes Ellison in order to force him to conform to the stereotype of the blocked writer even as he attests, paradoxically, to Ellison's "2,000 pages," which he moreover admits gave Ellison "all the makings of a book in hand" (55). Yet it matters little because this essay is not really about the new volume *Juneteenth* at all, which Podhoretz ultimately dismisses, bewilderingly,[66] as a "regression to literary derivativeness" written in

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[66] Bewildering because of Ellison's citation of Faulkner as one of the few twentieth-century American writers to pursue the question of race, and his controversial assertion in "The World and the Jug" that "one can, as artist, choose one's 'ancestors'" (140).

"the voice of William Faulkner" (56). Instead it is about *Invisible Man*, and Podhoretz's perception—not entirely unlike Warren's in structure, but in this case rendered beneath an unsettling racist veneer—that *Invisible Man* has expired. Its core figure of African American experience as one of "invisibility" has been supplanted: "For if Negroes—or blacks or African Americans—were once invisible, today, in the age of affirmative action and multiculturalism, they have become perhaps the most salient group in the American consciousness" (56). Although the novel impressed Podhoretz when he first encountered it ("I thought that Ellison had pulled off this supremely difficult task" (50)), it could not, retrospectively, pass Podhoretz's "acid test of greatness" for a "novel written in the past about the past," so that "the reader is gripped by it from the first word to the last" (57). "What Happened to Ralph Ellison," in short, is that the political paradigm governing *Invisible Man,* the single novel with which Ellison is generally identified, shifted. Although Podhoretz is tempted momentarily to speculate that a mythical "block" might be behind Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* production, the prominent, problematic novel comes, in the end, to Ellison's rescue as an author, even though history has changed the meaning of his novel.

Far more aggressive strokes foregrounding Ellison's production as such have been taken by the small but growing number of critical responses to *Three Days.* These commentaries, which differ from responses such as Podhoretz's because they no longer take *Invisible Man* as a starting place, include Callahan and Bradley's "General Introduction" to the book itself and Bradley's *Ralph Ellison in Progress* (2010), which is a critical companion volume to the manuscript that was released virtually simultaneously. As we shall see, these critical works, which constitute the core of the canon of criticism on the *Three Days* manuscript as it presently stands, foreground the novel manuscripts for their formal and stylistic features, which are far more difficult to isolate conclusively than any of these otherwise meticulous critics allow, undermining Ellison's actual interventions as a theorist of American literature and culture. I argue it is possible to observe in these texts a myth of block in the

process of formation, even as Ellison's manuscripts themselves, in their semi-legible chaos, serve as a testament to the real intellectual struggles their author sought to confront through a most tumultuous period of American social and political transformation.

In this chapter I pursue three related tasks, all of which seek to explain the cultural meaning of Ellison's complex post-*Invisible Man* production, which was hardly an affair of block but was nevertheless highly unusual. First, I address the problem of the form of Ellison's second novel materials, which goes unresolved despite an ambitious attempt by Callahan and Bradley to present those materials to the public in the volume *Three Days*. A reading of *Three Days*, I argue, must take into account the high level of editorial intervention in the text. Then, I venture into Ellison's own vision of the novel and its cultural function, which he theorized extensively in his essays. Here I offer a theory for how we might reformulate Ellison and his writing as a body of work that defies dominant twentieth-century perceptions about the primacy of craft to the art of novel writing, and which deliberately bears the legacy of a pre-modernist American literary tradition where concerns of social and political morality were seen as essential to the novel. Finally, I offer an alternate hermeneutic for reading *Three Days*, which embraces the new edition as a collaborative gesture left incomplete by Ellison and his editors alike, and in full view of its difficulty and flaws. Behind the myth of Ellison's block, which is paradoxically reasserted rather than resolved by the volume *Three Days*, lies the struggle of a serious literary intellectual trying to describe, analyze, and reshape fundamental American cultural problems. As Nadel wrote regarding *Juneteenth,* Ellison's second novelistic production "manifests a perhaps impossible faith in the power of art to reformulate history" (403). It is nevertheless important to trace evidence of the complex moral and historical problem Ellison sought and inevitably failed to resolve in the various fragments of *Three Days*, especially the political fate of racial ambiguity in the context and wake of the Civil Rights movement.

Formalizing Incompleteness

Three Days Before the Shooting, is a document of considerable literary historical importance. Editors Callahan and Bradley offer new riches to the devoted reader of Ralph Ellison, as well as to the scholar working to account for Ellison's cultural meaning. But the volume, ultimately, is a conundrum and an illusion. Its opacity, which is primarily a function of its incompleteness rather than its difficult to define formal inventiveness, renders it extraordinarily hard for the reader to enter, while its bulk implies significant intellectual labor on Ellison's part. Its existence belongs really to his devoted editors, who sought to offer access to the novel Ellison indeed "left forever in progress" (xxix), yet who could not escape the various contradictions of publishing such a document. *Three Days Before the Shooting* provides some insight into the problem of Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* production, but to approach the new volume as if it were a second Ellison novel is to participate in the Ellison myth; and the incorporation of *Three Days* into the Ellison oeuvre will paradoxically accelerate the myth of Ellison as a blocked writer. The book is not "The Unfinished Second Novel" of Ralph Ellison, as it is marketed. It is neither sufficiently a novel nor is it sufficiently by Ralph Ellison. At the same time, it is too coherent—that is to say too thoroughly edited and repackaged for the consumer—to be an accurate representation of the messy Ellison archive. Callahan and Bradley claim their editorial efforts are in the service of "Ellison's democratic cast of mind," which makes it "particularly important that his work be accessible to the widest possible audience" (487). By reducing the complexity of the archive without resolving the (probably irresolvable) problem of its opaque incompleteness, the largest volume available for purchase bearing Ellison's name becomes an ironic symbol for Ellison's problematic production, rather than his redemption: a thick block of a book signifying, and perhaps accelerating, the block myth Ellison's admirers and critics hoped it would overturn.

In 1981, three decades after its original publication, *Invisible Man* was rereleased as a Vintage paperback. While the book had never been out of print, Ellison took the occasion to compose a new preface reflecting on the novel's production. In his introduction, Ellison offers some limited biographical information regarding his life situation while he wrote *Invisible Man*, and gives the reader some insight into the unlikely writing projects from which the novel emerged. But he begins with this:

> What, if anything, is there that a novelist can say about his work that wouldn't be better left to the critics? They at least have the advantage of dealing with the words on the page, while for him the task of accounting for the process involved in putting them there is similar to that of commanding a smoky genie to make an orderly retreat—not simply back into the traditional bottle, but into the ribbon and keys of a by now defunct typewriter. (vii)

Citing the mysteriousness of the writing process and the difficulty of accounting for it, and yet essentially claiming it as the novelist's private business, Ellison here defers interpretive authority regarding *Invisible Man* to a new generation of critics. With "the advantage of dealing with the words on the page," the critics, presumably, should stick to the business of extending a literary work's meaning rather than pursue the secret history of a work's production, the scene of the novelist's craft.

Today, Ellison's remark might grate ironically against the ears of anyone who has attempted to approach *Three Days Before the Shooting*. In the "General Introduction" to this new edition of Ellison's second novel manuscript, editors Callahan and Bradley openly invite the reader to embrace an encounter with the "smoky genie" of literary production, with which Ellison did not want to burden the reader of *Invisible Man*. They explain,

> For those willing to confront the challenges of the work's fragmentary form, for

those capable of simultaneously grasping multiple versions of the same scene, *Three Days Before the Shooting…* offers unparalleled access to the craft of Ellison's fiction and an unprecedented glimpse into the writer's mind. Whether one reads this edition from start to finish or jumps from section to section, the experience involves a kind of collaboration with Ellison in the creation of the novel he left forever in progress. (xxix, italics original in title)

Let there be no mistake, the possibility that *Three Days* could provide an opportunity for "unparalleled access to the craft of Ellison's fiction" without a trip to the Library of Congress is an intriguing prospect for anyone trying to track Ellison's production onward from the 1950s. But the hermeneutic Callahan and Bradley propose for their volume is admittedly bewildering. They suggest the reader must be "*willing* to confront the challenges of the work's fragmentary form," as if this novel were a challenging modernist text written under the sign of deliberate formal experiment, and at the same time "*capable* of simultaneously grasping multiple versions of the same scene," because those scenes are versions of one another "forever in progress." Independently, these editorial imperatives could represent reasonable challenges for the aficionado of twentieth-century literature, who, by the moment of arrival at a relatively obscure, unfinished work like *Three Days,* will presumably have some familiarity with taxing modernist works of formal invention as well as complex editorial puzzles. But together they are less manageable: how can the reader who does not have faith in the authority of a text, who has only experienced a rudimentary introduction to the four-decade history of the composition and development of "an expansive archive of handwritten notes, typewritten pages, and computer files," ever hope to manage the difference between deliberate "fragmentary form" and "multiple versions of the same scene"? Despite Callahan and Bradley's optimistic guidance, "whether one reads this edition from start to finish or jumps from section to section" is a choice that does not exist for most readers of *Three Days.* Unless one has

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somehow mastered the plot of Ellison's unfinished novel in advance—something, as the editors frequently remind us, even Ellison was unable to do—the experience of reading the book is rather an affair of barely knowing character and plot, trying to keep in mind when the various fragments were written and how they interrelate, and continually rereading to piece together whether certain textual details are deliberate or accidental. And all this only to discover, in the end, that all questions ultimately refer back to an incomplete archive that offers no final answers.

This vexing proposed hermeneutic emerges from the negative, modernist formulations through which Callahan and Bradley articulate the nature of Ellison's text from the very beginning of their "General Introduction." For example, their opening characterization of the book seeks to identify the species of what Ellison left behind through a series of speculations on what Ellison's readers might have "reasonably" expected from his papers upon his death on April 16, 1994. This hypothetical manuscript might have fallen somewhere along a spectrum, they imagine, which it is possible to chart through the specific critical challenges presented by the work of a few novelists whom Callahan and Bradley see as emblematic cases of unusual literary production. Two of these writers, F. Scott Fitzgerald and James Joyce, are well known reference points in the history of modern literature.[67] On the one hand, given the amount of time that had passed since the publication of *Invisible Man*—four decades—and given Ellison's perennial optimism regarding the progress of his work,[68] the public could have "reasonably expected to find among [Ellison's] papers" something partially finished, "a single manuscript very near to completion, bearing evidence of the difficult choices he had made during the protracted period of the novel's composition" (xvi). Even if only halfway done, this manuscript, Callahan and Bradley suppose, might have been a complete

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[67] The third writer, Roberto Bolaño, is cited in a passing reference as the author of an almost complete novel for his work *2666*, which was published shortly after his death. According to his editor Ignacio Ecchiavaria, "its dimensions, its general content would by no means have been very different from what they are now" (xv).
[68] For example, as Callahan and Bradley explain, "In an interview just two months before his death, Ellison affirmed that 'the novel has got my attention now. I work every day, so there will be something very soon" (qtd. xv).

"fragment" comparable to F. Scott Fitzgerald's realist Hollywood novel *The Last Tycoon*, which was published following Fitzgerald's unexpected death in December 1940, but which possessed "a clearly drafted, clearly delineated beginning and middle, whose author's notes and drafts pointed toward two or three endings, each of which followed and resolved the projected novel as a whole" (xvi). On the other hand, and "[i]n the extreme," the editors write, "one might have expected something like James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, a glorious mess of a novel that defies the very generic constraints of the form" (xvi). What the public might have "reasonably" expected from Ellison was thus, in the formulation of his posthumous editors, one of two things. It was either a polished but incomplete draft of a realistic novel portraying a complex modern theme, interrupted unfortunately by its author's death but not fundamentally undermined by it; or it was an ostensibly finished work like Joyce's most audacious formal experiment, which, if it presses on the expectations of the reader, does so by design and in the effort to deliberately transgress genre conventions. The two major poles on the spectrum of what Ellison's readers might have expected are thus the *unfinished conventional novel*, its incompleteness measurable because the finished or nearly finished portion does not consummate some standard of plot or other narratological arc, and the *finished experimental novel*, which defies convention yet manages to achieve its authority through some readably intentional means of subversion. Drawing on modernist genres and writing practices as their baselines for literary normalcy, Callahan and Bradley imagine an incomplete novel manuscript forty years in the making, left incomplete by one of the most peculiar and moreover writerly American novelists of the twentieth century, could be expected by the reading public and the critical establishment to resemble some recognizable order of fiction from the twentieth-century canon.

Neither scenario accurately characterizes Ellison's manuscript. And while Callahan and Bradley admit this, clearly they do not resolve the problem of the nature of Ellison's text. Occupying the second paragraph of the "General Introduction," their series of negative comparisons seems

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designed to help a first-time reader orient herself in a complex text. Yet when the moment arrives for the editors to positively articulate the nature of Ellison's second novel, they persist in the limited terms of the formalist logic they have set up:

> Ellison left behind something else entirely: a series of related narrative fragments, several of which extend to over three hundred manuscript pages in length, that appear to cohere without truly completing one another. In fact, the thousands of handwritten notes, typewritten drafts, mimeographed pages and holographs, dot-matrix and laser printouts, testify to the massive and sustained effort Ellison exerted upon his fiction, but also to his ultimate failure to complete his manuscript so long in progress. In Ellison's second novel we have a work whose very incomprehensibility nonetheless perhaps extends the boundaries of the novel form, as Ellison suggested, in his 1956 essay "Society, Morality, and the Novel," every serious novel ought to do. (xvii)

Ellison not only "left behind" an unfinished work, despite his "massive and sustained effort" toward some goal of a conventionally recognizable "complete" state, but simultaneously provided a work "whose very incomprehensibility nonetheless perhaps extends the boundaries of the novel form." It is easy to admire Callahan and Bradley's basic gesture here, which places extraordinary faith in Ellison's authority despite his difficulty. On the surface, their citation of "Society, Morality, and the Novel" would certainly seem an appropriate one. Elsewhere in that essay, Ellison strongly denounces a critical trend he observes of dumbing down the complexity of difficult texts: "For if the nineteenth-century way with troublesome novels was to turn them over to the children, we in our time, being more sophisticated and literate, turn them over to the critics, who proceed to reduce the amazing elements to a minimum" (261). Clearly the spirit of Callahan and Bradley's "General Introduction" is to avoid the problem Ellison diagnoses here and to allow a difficult text to be

difficult. "Incomprehensibility" has been embraced, moreover, as a term of formal innovation since at least Walt Whitman, who wrote, in "Song of Myself," "My words itch at your ears till you understand them" (69), which would become the implied rallying cry of the modernists. William Carlos Williams, whom I cited earlier in this study, paraphrases the sentiment even better: "There is no confusion—only difficulties" (226). But modernist opacity is not the same thing as "incomprehensibility" generated by a work's incompleteness, and the two types of interpretive difficulty are openly conflated here. The reader is asked, essentially, to accept incomprehensibility in general—which, regarding a novel, can include but is not limited to formal opacity, rhetorical ambiguity, cultural miscommunication, as well editorial misunderstanding—as formal opacity alone. Surely Ellison, who wrote in the same essay that "whatever it achieves artistically, [the novel] is basically a form of communication" (242), could never accept such a premise, especially not in a preface designed to offer editorial guidance to the reader of the novel he himself never published.

If one *could* disregard the prefaces which occur throughout *Three Days* revealing the editorial logic underlying the volume, and embrace the major fragments themselves as Ellison's work, then *Three Days* would appear to proceed as a collection of unpublished materials pertaining to a single narrative world, an Ellisonian Yoknapatawpha. Book I, which aside from a Prologue is narrated in the first person, gives the white journalist Welbourne McIntyre's incomplete account of the shooting of Senator Adam Sunraider on the floor of the Senate, as well as of the chaos that ensues in Washington, DC in the attempt to work out the meaning of the event. Book II, which is much looser formally, and which mainly repeats the narrative presented in *Juneteenth*, begins with a rendering of the Senator's own experience of the shooting in free, indirect discourse, and then follows him into his hospital room where he is joined by the Reverend Alonso Hickman. Here, the reader is transported frequently into the past and learns how Sunraider was raised by Hickman in an African American community in the South, and how his subsequent career as a senator from a

northern state prone to racist public outburst constitutes an astonishing evasion of his past. These

two sections of the novel appear to represent a pair of intelligibly linked fragments: two tellings of

the Sunraider story, one by a third party, and another form a more obscure, omniscient point of

view, which do not complete one another but which provide more information about Ellison's

project when considered in concert than they do independently.[69] When the volume proceeds to

Part III, where the editors present the various computer manuscripts Ellison worked on after 1982,

where he added significant new material to the novel as well as previously published excerpts from

the work, the reader encounters a set of materials that have the atmosphere of useful appendices.

Had *Three Days* been released like *Juneteenth*, with a single editorial preface and without the extensive

notes provided by the editors, it is possible to imagine extremely devoted readers willing to

persevere amid its ambiguities dismissing aspects of its formal incompleteness in the way readers of

Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* have usually accepted that book, as a nearly complete novelistic world

afflicted mainly by narratological problems left unsolved by its author.[70]

The editorial prefaces, however, which precede every major section of the volume, are

necessary information for most readers of *Three Days*, who would otherwise have a very difficult time

understanding the basic plot and facts of the novel. This is the volume's paradox, because these

prefaces also undermine the volume's stability. While concurrently attesting to the value of the

fragments in the reader's hands, the editors continually remind the reader that the selections

contained inside the volume *Three Days* do not ultimately represent Ellison's plan. The deeper one

gets into the volume, moreover, the more the editors allude to the extremely complicated logic of

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[69] The most compelling reading of the interplay between the two sections so far belongs to Michael Szalay, who sees them as a compelling allegory for American politics during the Civil Rights movement: "*Three Days* describes a dialectic relation between northern white professionals (like McIntyre) fascinated by what it means to be black, and southern blacks (like Hickman) fascinated by that fascination" (819).

[70] Fitzgerald's novel is complicated by the status of Celia Brady as narrator. Celia, the daughter of a Hollywood producer, narrates at the beginning of the novel, and her perspective as an admirer of central character Monroe Stahr is pivotal to the opening chapters. Partway through the fragment, however, the narrative departs from what Celia could have observed firsthand, raising the question of whether Fitzgerald had resolved the narrative structure of the novel by the time of the death.

the editorial method at work in the book. In the book's "General Introduction," Callahan and Bradley summarize their editorial method as a rather straightforward affair of relying on Ellison's latest drafts as much as possible:

> In every case, the text selected represents the latest continuous sequence of narrative from the particular period of Ellison's composition. For the Book I and II typescripts, we've reproduced the manuscripts clearly marked with the latest date in Fanny Ellison's hand. With the computer drafts, we have reproduced those files marked with the most recent dates…We carefully reviewed all earlier variants with an eye toward noting textual differences and understanding Ellison's compositional process and have included a sample of these variants in Part III. All of these materials will now be made available to scholars in the Ralph Ellison Papers at the Library of Congress. (xxviii)

This suggests that there is some authority to Ellison's final revisions, to the drafts "marked with the latest date in Fanny Ellison's hand" (Ellison's wife). But undated materials from the archive, and questions regarding the finality of Ellison's editorial decisions, mar the feasibility of the assumptions underlying this editorial method even in regards to Book II, which is "the most thoroughly worked over and revised section of Ellison's unfinished second novel" (233). Here is an excerpt from the editors' specific explanation of how they assembled that section from a typescript Ellison brought to his summer home in Plainfield, Massachusetts in 1986:

> Published in the present volume, this 355-page typescript is the longest version of Book II as well as the most recent. That being said, pages 319 to 352 (pages 422 to 455 in this volume) appear considerably less revised and polished—less settled on—than pages 1 to 319; also the text of pages 352 to 355 has handwritten pagination and a handwritten notation by Ellison ("follows Book II") in the top right corner of page

352. Interestingly, Ellison filled out this episode from Book II in the computer-generated narrative "Hickman in Washington, D.C." There are also other partial surviving typescripts of certain episodes from Book II, in particular the visit to the Lincoln Memorial by Reverend Hickman and his congregation before the assassination of Senator Sunraider.

Publication of Book II, both in *Juneteenth* and in this volume, was informed by the fact that Ellison made extensive revisions in pencil on his carbon copy of pages 1 through 284 of the latest, most complete typescript as well as some—fewer, but still some—revisions on the original manuscript. In some cases there is reworking of the same passage. In these instances our editorial judgment has had to do due diligence for a definitive reading of Ellison's intention since neither the original typescript nor its carbon are dated (234)

Notice the contradictory nature of the process of editorial revision described here. This passage raises serious editorial questions on how the fragments published in *Three Days* were shaped, only to dismiss them. The reader might rightly wonder, for example, to what extent does it matter that the editors present Ellison's "most recent" dated typescript in this instance when there are other, presumably undated, "surviving typescripts" of some scenes from Book II, and when the computer drafts also bear significantly on the narrative fragment? There is, moreover, an original manuscript *and* a carbon copy of the typescript that provided most of the source for Book II, both of which contain revisions in hand by Ellison; the "due diligence" of the editors has had to stand in further for Ellison's intention. This does not necessarily undermine the stability of the volume in and of itself, which conceivably has been accepted by readers as a kind of corrected edition finished for Ellison by a qualified third-party. What threatens the volume, rather, is how the editors seem determined to inform the reader of the necessary complexity of their process while simultaneously

presenting long, seemingly finished fragments without specific annotations. Unlike a typical scholarly edition of a literary text, the manuscripts in the Library of Congress considered part of Ellison's second novelistic production simply do not underlie *Three Days* as drafts pertaining to some final or semi-finalized product. *Three Days* is altogether an incomplete collection of unfinished drafts pertaining to an unpublished novel, which becomes increasingly unstable the further one gets into the volume.

Ellison's compositional process was highly nonlinear, to be certain, and he did not organize his drafts in such a way that would make them easily interpretable by a third party. He never worked out the order of the various sections of his novel, and he composed episodically and over the course of many years, leaving behind various, undated versions of the same scene, some of which were written many years apart. Whereas archival work can sometimes explain the meaning of a literary text through an examination of the cuts and other edits a writer made between the various versions, it is very difficult to work out a logic of intentionality behind specific choices in Ellison's materials, although this is not exactly Ellison's failing. (The expectation that there would be a definitive, final version of Ellison's unpublished text may reveal as much about the conditions required to perform meaningful archival research on a writer's process as it does about Ellison's process in particular.) For the researcher persisting in theorizing Ellison's presumed intention and process despite all this, the problem of the drafts becomes further compounded after 1982, when he began using a word processor, with its vast capacity for revision. As his editors explain, these files represent an all but insurmountable critical challenge:

> Ellison's computer files are expansive, yet so incomplete that they render moot any discussion of final authorial intention. The multiplicity of variants and the ambiguity of Ellison's plans for the novel make it impossible to designate an 'authoritative' text. Using a computer enabled him to make such frequent changes and save so many

> versions of a given file that distinguishing the *most* authoritative hardly applies
> without the accompanying authorial instructions, which Ellison failed to leave
> behind. (486, italics original)

It is hard to imagine what "authorial instructions" such an impulsive reviser, who for forty decades did not resolve how to structure his second novel, would conceivably leave behind, but the warning of the editors comes through loud and clear: the computer drafts do not resolve the problems left open in the typescripts. They inconveniently complicate the meaning and possible finality of the typescripts instead. The problem, essentially, is one of genre. Ellison was once a novelist, and his computer drafts and other writings pertain to a project he thought of as his second novel, but they do not actually constitute novelistic material.

Three Days is a massive, complex tome, and assembling it from an even more massive, complex archive was an extraordinary challenge for Callahan and Bradley. There can be no doubt that these two scholars proceeded in good faith toward moving beyond the controversies of *Juneteenth*, the book Callahan, working alone, presented to the reading public as an "organic unity" that could be taken as "the narrative that best stands alone as a single, self-contained volume" (*Juneteenth* xv).[71] The new edition seeks to be itself a kind of archive for the reader of Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* novelistic production, as it contains several hundred pages of additional material—shorter fragments, computer drafts, previously published materials, as well as the editorial notes—in addition to the two large fragments that seem to form its backbone. It cannot however, offer the reader a realistic means for entering Ellison's saga, the full providence of which is simply not known. Nor does it accurately represent Ellison's incomplete archive as a comprehensive scholarly edition

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[71] Dissatisfied readers, such as Stanley Crouch, mistrusted Callahan's assertions that *Juneteenth* took on "a finished form within the enormous, unfinished saga," or at least one that Ellison would have published: "There's always the inevitable question: Would Ralph Ellison himself have made those choices? We don't know. Personally, I don't think he would" (qtd. in Feeley). Callahan received more pointed criticism from Albert Murray—a recipient of some of the earliest material from the novel from Ellison in the 1950s—for all but excising the character Welbourne McIntyre from *Juneteenth*. Murray found the white journalist's role as narrator of Ellison's saga essential for its complication of the question of racial identity in the novel.

might; it is heavily recrafted by the editors, but without notes showing specific editorial choices. *Three Days* is an incomplete archive of drafts pertaining to possible novel, which is then forced between the covers of a printed book as if it might still be readable as a novel.[72]

The way the editors shape the reader's experience in *Three Days* is thus all the more important. By naming the "incomprehensibility" and "fragmentary form" of this text as key components of its virtue, by suggesting that it is the responsibility of the "willing," "capable" reader to persist across a variety of scenes, which derive from a variety of formats, Callahan and Bradley repeat the contradictory gesture of *Juneteenth*—to release an incomplete fragment as an "organic unity"—on a much grander scale. They make a broad array of Ellison's unpublished work available for the first time, in particular the McIntyre fragment, which is admirable. But in the process they disguise the ultimate incompleteness of Ellison's second novelistic production by suggesting, paradoxically, that its incomplete, unintelligible aspects are a kind of formal completeness. A scholarly edition is always a kind of simulated archive, but simulation alone is not the problem of *Three Days*. There is no way to present a bound, published volume—a book—that accurately represents the chaos of the manuscripts, computer drafts, and other materials housed at the Library of Congress pertaining to Ellison's unfinished second novel.

In "Trouble" with Huck, for "Cheating"

The critical problem Callahan and Bradley produce in their *Three Days Before the Shooting* introduction, albeit through their generosity toward Ellison and his difficult text, is a version of the

[72] One wonders if a digital archive might not be a better and perhaps more appropriate way to present Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* novelistic production to the public. Bradley, after all, announces Ellison as "a literary pioneer for the digital age" for his incorporation of word processing technology into his method: "In composing his novel in progress on the computer he was among the first authors enlisted, whether consciously or not, in a grand experiment measuring the effects of digital technology on the craft of fiction, an experiment that continues to this day" (32-3). Admittedly, Ellison seems to have been under the illusion that his computer revisions were moving him toward some finished product; the computer, it seems, contributed to his endless revising. Still, it is tempting to suppose that Ellison was struggling through a formal problem that might have been resolved by some new media form, that the possibilities of hypertext, or even a self-published blog, might have provided him means for expressing the saga he only partially captured in his drafts.

literary historical phenomenon Ellison describes in "Society, Morality, and the Novel." This is, not insignificantly, the very essay the editors cite early in their introduction. The editors utilize the essay like this: "In Ellison's second novel we have a work whose very incomprehensibility nonetheless perhaps extends the boundaries of the novel form, as Ellison suggested, in his 1956 essay 'Society, Morality, and the Novel,' every serious novel ought to do" (xvii). They speak of "incomprehensibility" as the domain of this work's formal innovation, and they are correct to cite Ellison as an advocate for embracing literary complexity at the potential expense of readerly understanding in order to achieve some higher intellectual purpose. But Ellison doesn't write in favor specifically of *formal* difficulty in his essay, or for that matter any complexity of technique except insofar as literary form, craft, and style are a function of content. For Ellison, novel-writing was always a unified, rhetorical act, "a form of communication" (242). He mocks the self-promotion of "the most 'difficult' novelist of the period" James Joyce—"Clearly it is no accident that more people have read about how his books should be read than have read them" (259)—and he suggests that the stylistic preoccupations of the writers of the "Lost Generation," which is one of Ellison's ways of talking about modernism, represent "a literary conceit of such major proportions that today it looks like a swindle" (258). Ellison goes on, in this acerbic essay, "For all the personal despair which informed it and the hard work which brought it into being, the emphasis on technique gave something of a crossword-puzzle-fad aspect to the literature of the twenties, and very often the questions of the Sphinx were lost in the conundrums. Without doubt, major questions went unanswered" (259). Ellison's complaint, which he wrote in this essay in 1956 but which he rehearses elsewhere,[73] is that twentieth-century American literary critics, in their haste to track the growth of trends and movements such as the novel of manners or the Lost Generation, have extended the loss

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[73] See also the essays "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" (1953) and "The World and the Jug" (1963/4) both of which occur in the collection *Shadow and Act*, as well as "The Novel as a Function of American Democracy" (1967) in *Going to the Territory*.

of the moral dimension suffered by twentieth-century American fiction writers, especially on the question of race. Despite the profound American need for "serious novels" confronting the race question, "we are a people who, while desiring identity, have been reluctant to pay the cost of its achievement," and so unfortunately prefer "things that confer"—that is to say provide an argument for—"happiness, beauty, and grace" (252-3).

What Ellison describes, through a series of three examples that "have been quite influential in shaping our ideas of American fiction and how it should be read" (262), is a process of critical elision of the moral concerns of American novels, a process of misreading that even marks responses seeking to offer "definition" and "orientation" in the terrain of American literature (262). Ellison refers to these responses as potential "touchstones," which have unfortunately "become inflated and transformed into a set of wandering rocks which threate[n] to crush us" (262). Citing Lionel Trilling and Henry James on Nathaniel Hawthorne, as well as Malcolm Cowley on William Faulkner's "The Bear," Ellison meticulously tracks how critics buried the moral dimension of these works. The most salient of his examples, however, is Ernest Hemingway's famous, often quoted— and according to Ellison, usually misquoted—remark in *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) regarding the centrality of *Huckleberry Finn* to the history of modern American literature. Here, Ellison offers what may be the clearest expression of his thesis on twentieth-century fiction: that the rise of fiction-writing as a craft in the twentieth-century has sometimes come at the expense of moral depth on matters of sociopolitical import, specifically the question of race.

The *Green Hills of Africa* remark is almost always paraphrased like this: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*…it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that" (qtd. in Ellison 266-7, ellipsis original). Formulated in this way, Hemingway's remark is usually taken as an expression of tribute and aesthetic approval, suggesting Twain's willingness to allow Huck and Jim to speak in dialect was an essential step

toward democratizing the novel and enabling it to more accurately portray the diversity of American

life. Obviously this is true, in part; the popularity of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* did help pave the

way for writers like Hemingway, Faulkner and others whose work is permeated by regional

American voices. As Ellison points out, however, Hemingway's remark contains an essential caveat,

a caveat through which Hemingway actually eschews much of the moral content of Twain's book.

Here is Hemingway's quote in its original form:

> All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called
>
> *Huckleberry Finn. If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the*
>
> *boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating.* But it's the best book we've had. All
>
> American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been
>
> nothing as good since. (22, italics mine)

Obviously this is racist and an overstatement by Hemingway. It is also a revealing misstatement: Jim

isn't stolen from the "boys" in the plural, but rather from Huck alone.[74] This matters, because the

appearance of Huck's friend Tom Sawyer at the Phelps farm, where Jim is being held, is the plot

coincidence in which the section of the novel constituting "cheating" for Hemingway originates

(and, for some readers, the coincidence in which the novel sacrifices its formal realism). But what

Hemingway means is that the innovation of Twain's novel lies in the domain of craft, and that

Twain's complex involvement in the politics of Reconstruction in the controversial final chapters of

his novel—in Huck's decision to free Jim, and especially in Tom Sawyer's long charade that

unnecessarily prolongs Jim's enslavement even though Tom knows Jim has already been freed by

Miss Watson—somehow degrade his literary achievement.

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[74] Victor A. Doyno also comments on this error. He cites it as damning evidence of Hemingway's obtuseness as a reader of Twain: "Apparently Hemingway must have been one of many Americans who conflates all Tom and Huck stories and feels free to judge his own memorial fabrication" (223).

To imagine the broader implications of Ellison's position, Hemingway, presumably, would prefer Huck to struggle with the moral question of Jim's freedom without resolution, as Huck does throughout the novel before the moving scene where he tears up his note to Miss Watson revealing the runaway slave's location, announcing, conclusively, "All right, then, I'll *go* to hell" (344, italics original). A Hemingway Huck would write in dialect, just as Twain's Huck does, but he would end up in the morally ambiguous position of a Jake Barnes or a Nick Adams: suffering personal moral wounds that do not necessarily stir him to further political action. Ellison reads Hemingway's position on Twain as an evasion of the novel's most important aspect, the "moral necessity which makes Huck know that he must *at least make the attempt* to get Jim free; to 'steal' him free," which is no incidental word but "the term by which Twain reveals Huck's full awareness of the ambiguousness of his position, and through which he roots the problem in American social reality and draws upon the contradiction between democratic idealism and the existence of slavery" (267, italics original). In defining his own "philosophical position," which is an aesthetic position, Hemingway turns a blind eye to Twain's sophisticated moral argument, which promoted moral reflection on the desecration of African American civil rights during Reconstruction,[75] in favor of promoting Twain's stylistic inventiveness as a key development in American literary history.

The flaw Ellison observes in Hemingway's critical logic has been reproduced uncannily in appraisals of Ellison's book. Consider the following proscription extracted from *Ralph Ellison in Progress*, the volume *Three Days* co-editor Adam Bradley published shortly after the release of the new edition of Ellison's manuscripts. Addressing the unfinished nature of Ellison's text, Bradley rightly intervenes in the reader's possible assumption that Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* production was an affair of "psychological" block. "Ellison was grappling with writerly conflicts," Bradley explains,

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[75] For a thorough account of how Twain might have sought to comment on the convict-lease system in the final chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*, see Doyno, Victor A. "Repetition, Cycles, and Structure." *Writing* Huck Finn: *Mark Twain's Creative Process*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1991. 223-255.

"not psychological ones" (15). Yet even for Bradley, who correctly identifies the origin of Ellison's "writerly conflicts" as the problematic nature of his material rather than some flaw in the writer's intellect, what is "writerly" becomes synonymous with "craft":

> Reading Ellison's manuscripts, it soon becomes apparent that his reasons for not publishing a second novel likely had little to do with psychological disposition, procrastination, or lack of focus and almost entirely to do with his failure to solve certain basic textual challenges presented by his material. For all the writing he did, Ellison had yet to resolve the questions of craft required of fashioning his drafts into a whole. Always bedeviled by transitions, he found himself continually struggling with how best to fit the episodic pieces of his narrative together. (17)

There is no doubt Ellison struggled with the "craft" of novel-writing throughout his career, including during the writing of *Invisible Man*.[76] But Bradley's account of Ellison's struggle as a primarily technical affair indicates an acceptance of the vocabulary of twentieth-century cultural assumptions against which Ellison sought to define himself. These were the terms of a literary culture eager to promote, with Hemingway, democratizing surface features, such as the use of regional dialects in *Huckleberry Finn*, because such features offered advantages for the craft of the novel, at the expense of foregrounding the unresolved question of race in American society.

In essays such as "Society, Morality, and the Novel," Ellison expresses, on the contrary, significant concern over the reluctance on the part of modern authors to see the moral and political question of race in the US as a mainstream literary question. Ellison prompts all twentieth-century fiction writers, and not just writers belonging to a particular ethnic group, to reconsider such questions as problems for the novel: "How does one in the novel (the novel which is a work of art and not a disguised piece of sociology) persuade the American reader to identify that which is basic

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[76] An overview of some of the editorial processes to which *Invisible Man* was subjected is available in Rampersad's biography. See Rampersad, Arnold. *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. New York: X, 199X. 199-267. (Chapters 8-10).

in man beyond all differences of class, race, wealth, or formal education?" (273). Surely this question has implications for craft, if by craft one means the choices a novelist makes in order to communicate with his or her society. It also recognizes the novelist's responsibility to offer social and moral critique as an element of the novel's art, an element as essential as the craft of novel-writing itself. For Ellison the novel was, of course, an art form: "Every serious novel is, beyond its immediate thematic preoccupations, a discussion of the craft, a conquest of the form, and a conflict with its difficulties; a pursuit of its felicities and beauty" (" Society" 241). But like the nineteenth-century authors Ellison frequently cites, writers who saw the novel as a container for philosophical, historical, and political commentary—Hawthorne, Melville, Twain—the art of novel-writing was inseparable, for Ellison, from another aspect of the novel, "which seems so obvious that it is seldom mentioned, and which as a consequence tends to make most discussions of the form irritatingly abstract: By its nature it seeks to communicate a vision of experience. Therefore, whatever else it achieves artistically, it is basically a form of communication" (241-2). All novels are imperfect rhetorical art, in Ellison's perception, but this hardly means they are not art. In fact the novel's utility is precisely that it is an art form that "thrives on change and social turbulence" (245). Rather than evading social and political problems in the pursuit of formal resolution, the novel offers, in Ellison's perception, an imperfect, synecdochic social mirror: "It is not, like poetry, concerned primarily with words, but with action depicted in words; and it operates by amplifying and giving resonance to a specific complex of experience until, through the eloquence of its statement, that specific part of life speaks metaphorically for the whole" (242). To put it in the terms of Ellison's own best example, *Huckleberry Finn* may seem a failure of aesthetics for Hemingway's "morality of craftsmanship" (255), just as it has seemed a kind of failure for many scholars of Twain. But for Ellison, this does not necessarily undermine the meaning of the final chapters of Twain's novel, precisely because the irrationality of the ending—the rather unbelievable coincidence that sets it off

(Tom's return to the novel), and the tedious length of the boys' charade—reflects, synecdochically, the irrationality of postbellum American political life, where institutions such as the convict-lease system effectively became a de facto slavery for newly emancipated blacks just as Tom and Huck keep Jim imprisoned despite Tom's knowledge that Jim is legally free.

So it is with Ellison himself. The critical problem of Ellison's production seems, at first glance, ironic: Ellison made a significant critique of the American twentieth-century novel without managing to complete his own novel. But to perceive Ellison in this way is to participate in a vision of literary production determined by craft, and to misunderstand how Ellison viewed the novel, which for him was always "a basic problem of rhetoric" in addition to being a work of art. Essays such as "Society, Morality, and the Novel" may be read as an apology for Ellison's perceived failure, or, as Weber skeptically suggests, as a conscious or subconscious attempt on Ellison's part to account for the shape of his career.[77] Yet this is a critical choice, and one that scandalously privileges writing in the genre of the novel as the benchmark of literary achievement, since the existence of the essays obviously testifies to the perseverance of Ellison's literary intelligence beyond the writing of *Invisible Man*. The precise relationship between Ellison's theory of the novel, as represented in his essays, and his own practice is of course an arguable matter, but the essays are not merely conveniently resonant; they are uncannily so. Ellison may not have been able to suture the parts of his novel together, but to imagine this was because he wanted to keep his novel eternally "in progress," as Callahan and Bradley would have it—that there was some personal value for Ellison in keeping an "open-ended," unfinished manuscript—is to embrace a myth of Ellison as writer that

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[77] Weber: "*Shadow and Act* appeared twelve years after *Invisible Man*, when the book's [*Invisible Man*'s] reputation could still be called ascendant…and before nervousness about the Hickman project's completion began to dominate critical discourse about Ellison's career. On the other hand, *Going to the Territoy* followed the original work by thirty-four years, preceding the author's death by less than a decade. It is clearly a reflective work from the author's middle-to-late career, gazing back toward his early success. It is quite clearly delayed paratext, as Genette defined that term" (122). See my discussion of Weber in Part One, Section III (46-55).

depends upon a block myth, and which makes it difficult to observe Ellison's actual contribution, much of which took place outside the genre of the novel.

To approach Ellison post-*Invisible Man* production as a failure of craft is very much to risk overlooking the moral complexities of his writing, some of which went unresolved. The literary historical irony of his production is not the fact that he was able to see clearly the situation of twentieth-century American literature and yet still fail "to solve certain textual challenges presented by his materials." Nor should his production of a sprawling, incomplete text be registered artificially as a kind of modernist success, even as the influence of difficult modernist texts has provided a means for marketing and appreciating works like Ellison's. Rather the irony of Ellison's career, and through it the meaning of Ellison as a cultural figure, is the extent to which the author grappled in published and unpublished works with the American novel as a problem of morality *and* craft—in the pages of *Invisible Man*, in the published and unpublished fragments of the second novel, and most powerfully and completely in essays and lectures such as "Society, Morality, and the Novel"— while a critical culture accustomed to modernist craft pretensions as such has managed to shape Ellison's problem as one of the success or failure of novelistic technique rather than as a complex crisis of ideas. The dissociation of craft from other aspects of novelistic discourse, above all from the novel's capacity to propose contingent social and political moral possibility, is what Ellison saw as a key problem of twentieth-century American literature. And yet even though Ellison meditated at length on that problem in a variety of contexts, which Ellison critics themselves frequently cite with *Invisible Man* as one of his major contributions to American intellectual history, critical preoccupation with the success or failure of novels in terms of craft has largely prevented critics from knowing how to take Ellison's career as a whole.

Ellison may have been as "bedeviled by transitions" as any novelist, as Bradley would have it, but it is a mistake to take his post-*Invisible Man* novelistic production as a problem that could have

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been rectified in a postwar creative writing workshop. For all the stylistic flair of *Invisible Man*, Ellison's basic notion of the function of the novel was rhetorical and political, and highly anachronistic. He should be read accordingly: not as a failed modernist experimenter, nor as a failed practitioner of the learnable craft of creative writing, but as an unbending practitioner and theorist of the novel as an imperfect art of social, political, and psychological critique, or as he put it, "our most rational art form for dealing with the irrational" (246). Ellison failed to unify the sprawling work that might have proven the possibility of such a novel in twentieth-century American culture, but this does not mean his impulse to reach back across modernism to an older literary paradigm was without significance. Rather it constitutes, but also comments upon, a difficult-to-classify, important crisis in American intellectual history, specifically in the history of the criticism of the novel.

This crisis is modernism's fallout in the critical realm. In their effort to respond to the fast-changing conditions of the modern world, and to offer representations based in modern patterns of language and consciousness rather than repeat traditional forms, especially those of the social realist tradition, modernist writers—Joyce, Woolf, Hemingway, Faulkner, and others—opened new possibilities for fiction by embracing formal and stylistic innovation in new, unexpected ways. This energized the world of fiction. As Ellison himself explains, in the paragraph of "Society, Morality, and the Novel" immediately following his scathing remarks on Hemingway's rejection of the ending of *Huckleberry Finn*, "it is useless to quarrel with history, and as one who is committed to the craft [of fiction] I can even admit that Hemingway's art justifies what he made of Twain's" (268). But the accidental byproduct of "Hemingway's art" was the perceived dissociation of the craft of the novel from the novel's capacity to offer sociopolitical critique. Ellison continues, "But what are we to say of the critics who circulate his statement as though it were the word of God?" (Ellison 268). The problem Ellison identifies, which he describes incisively and yet which has shaped the reception of

his own work profoundly, is not a problem of literary modernism itself, but of the unselfconscious absorption of the assumptions of modernism by critics and the ways this process has shaped literary history. Since many critics reassert the basic assumptions of the modernist aesthetic, especially modernism's acceptance of the primacy of literature as craft, the meaning of texts such as Twain's or Ellison's, which operate according to a very different novelistic code, are sometimes misunderstood. To put it in the terms of Ellison's example, Hemingway might as well be correct. It might as well be literally true that "[a]ll modern American literature *comes from* one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*" and its influence on literary craft. But to evaluate *Huckleberry Finn* itself in terms of craft on the basis of its influence is to participate in literary critical back-formation: reading the logic of the development of a historically contingent literary paradigm in the materials from which that rhetoric ostensibly emerged.

Witness, in contrast, the originality of Ellison's position in the context of the criticism of the mid-twentieth century to which he was responding directly. Consider his thesis on Twain beside that of Leo Marx in the landmark essay "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and *Huckleberry Finn*." Marx published this essay in 1953, the year following the publication of *Invisible Man*. At times, Marx could *be* Ellison:

> Perhaps the kind of moral issue raised by *Huckleberry Finn* is not the kind of moral issue to which today's criticism readily addresses itself. Today our critics, no less than our novelists and poets, are more sensitively attuned to moral problems which arise in the sphere of individual behavior. They are deeply aware of sin, of individual infractions of our culture's Christian ethic. But my impression is that they are, possibly because of the strength of the reaction against the mechanical sociological criticism of the thirties, less sensitive to questions of what might be called social or political morality….the values implicit in a social system, values which may be quite distinct from the personal morality of any given individual within the society. (199)

It might be said that Marx walks around the issue of race in passages such as this one by rendering the "moral issue" of Twain's novel in the abstract, but his sense that there is a critical blindness toward "social" and "political morality" resonates strongly with Ellison's theory. The essay in which these remarks occur is moreover a response to essays by T.S. Eliot and Lionel Trilling and what Marx perceives as their far too easy embrace of their respective theories of the "dubious structural unity" of *Huckleberry Finn* regarding the problem of the novel's ending. In Eliot's case, Tom Sawyer's reappearance at the end of the book is "right" simply because it returns, symmetrically, to the novel's opening mood (23); Trilling identifies a "certain formal aptness" in the ending as "some device is needed to return Huck to his anonymity, to give up the role of hero, to fall into the background which he prefers" (13). Marx is unmoved by these abstractions deployed in defense of the novel's form, a perspective with which Ellison would very probably agree. Yet Marx wages an attack against Twain as well, and his argument is ultimately an account of Twain's "failure" to imagine a solution to the question of race in the US in general rather than the rhetorical success of the historically contingent argument Twain offered. Marx openly seeks to address the question of "social" and "political morality" in American literature, yet even he falls into the critical trap Ellison articulates in "Society, Morality, and the Novel" through his inability to imagine Twain's aesthetic failure as not only necessary, but novelistic. Marx writes, "Clemens had presented the contrast between the two social orders but could not, or would not, accept the tragic fact that the one he had rejected was an image of solid reality and the other"—the heterotopian world of the raft—"an ecstatic dream" (7). In the end, Marx actually has much in common with Eliot and Trilling, only his formulation is negative. Eliot and Trilling seek to articulate the success of *Huckleberry Finn* as a work of art for all time, and so rely on loose abstractions to account for the historically contingent arguments present in the novel as it was published circa 1885 (and in Eliot's case on blind faith in

Twain's "unconscious art" (24)).[78] Marx, on the other hand, acknowledges that Twain's novel deals with questions of social and political morality that modern criticism has a difficult time confronting, but he presupposes *Huckleberry Finn* is aesthetically flawed and that the novel's ending tracks an inability on Twain's part to complete its intended "devastating criticism at the existing social order" (7): "[t]he raft patently was not capable of carrying the burden of hope Clemens placed upon it" (11). As a result, he, too, only partly registers the depth of Twain's moral arguments, observing the ending of the novel as Twain's imaginative collapse rather than as the possible failure of modern criticism he originally sets out to lance.

In both cases, the dissociation of Twain's art from his moral and political arguments limits the capacity of the critic to register what Ellison, who was not a professional literary historian, intuits through his skepticism of professional literary criticism. For Ellison, the novel as an instrument of social and political critique is *always* also a matter of finding a form and a language for the "unknown," and through that form, *perhaps*, of producing the historically contingent, "significantly new" ("Society" 239) What Marx perceives as Twain's aesthetic failure, what Eliot and Trilling make excuses for through loose structures, what Hemingway called "cheating," is not the novelist's failure or insufficiency at all. On the contrary, it is a critical failure to reconcile the potential scale of the socially and politically engaged novelist's ambition with his acceptance of his own historical contingency, which is engendered by the perceived incompatibility of art and social critique in a literary culture forged in perceptions of literary art as craft.

Literary criticism has undergone radical transformations since the middle of the twentieth century, when Trilling, Eliot, and Marx wrote their responses to Twain. The rise of the New Historicism in the 1980s, for instance, which might be thought of in part as a reaction to the

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[78] Eliot writes, "In *Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain wrote a much greater book than he could have known he was writing. Perhaps all great works of art mean much more than the author could have been aware of meaning: *Huckleberry Finn* is the one book of Mark Twain's which, as a whole, has this unconsciousness. So what seems to be the rightness, of reverting, at the end of the book to the mood of *Tom Sawyer*, was perhaps unconscious art" (23-24).

aesthetic and formal preoccupations of critics such as these, offered a special imperative to return to historical context and to the archive, and through it positive new ways of approaching authors like Ellison and Twain. But the problem Ellison identifies here, which is essentially an incomplete, bifurcated vision held by some professional literary critics regarding what a novel should be, has a legacy that persists into our own time, and it bears considerably on how we approach Ellison's own work as well. The negative formulations I have cited here as poles on the spectrum of critical response to Twain strongly resemble the two novelistic models Callahan and Bradley suppose, negatively, that Ellison's second novel manuscript ought to have, and ultimately could not, fit into. Marx misreads *Huckleberry Finn* as an *incomplete, conventional novel*, a work that does not live up to its own formal plan; Eliot and Trilling accept it far too easily as a *finished, experimental novel*, where the experimentation takes place cleanly in the aesthetic rather than the political or moral realms. In their devotion to Ellison, Callahan and Bradley do not reduce Ellison in this way; they are well aware that Ellison pursued the "unknown" by principle in his fiction writing, and that he sought the "significantly new." In their failure to positively articulate what Ellison's novel is, and in Bradley's return to "craft" and "technique" as reasons for Ellison's inability to finish his second work, they fumble nevertheless through the same perceived dissociation of craft and social commentary that limited Trilling, Eliot, and Marx.

Perhaps an alternate model for how we should approach Ellison lies in the text the writer himself sought to recover from Hemingway's critical misrepresentation, *Huckleberry Finn*. In the final lines of Twain's novel, Huck explains that he wished he hadn't involved himself in the "trouble" of writing a book at all. Now that Tom Sawyer, who was wounded by a real bullet during the charade of freeing Jim, is on the mend, and the boys can presumably pursue some new adventure, Huck announces his plans to abandon writing altogether:

there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a

knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing

to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest,

because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I

been there before. (444)

The passage is significant because it is probably the most prominent instance in Twain's novel where

Huck is depicted as the writer of his own story, rather than just as the story's oral teller. It is thus an

instance where Twain insists upon the possibility of vernacular speech as the language of literature.

But it also matters that what Huck means by "trouble" in his sign-off is very murky. Given Huck's

expressed rejection of further attempts to "sivilize" him, a process that would presumably transform

his grammar and style away from dialect in which he writes throughout the book and toward

standard English, it could easily be what the twenty-first-century reader would call a crisis of

technique or craft. But the attentive reader of Twain's book will recall that Huck's "trouble" as a

storyteller sometimes can have a psychological dimension. Recall Huck's reticence regarding the

violence that explodes between the feuding Shepherdson and Grangerford families after Sophia

Grangerford runs off to marry a Shepherdson son: "It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree. I

ain't agoing to tell *all* that happened—it would make me sick again if I was to do that. I wished I

hadn't ever come ashore that night, to see such things. I ain't ever going to get shut of them—lots of

times I dream about them" (195). Here Huck reveals himself to be traumatized by visions of the

violence of the feud. He is so traumatized, in fact, that he is reluctant to return to it in the telling of

his story. Huck is, in short, psychologically blocked by a vision of human violence, and, although it

has nothing to do with the "trouble" of storytelling as craft, it affects the telling of his story.

But Huck's block is *not* writer's block. If he is imagined as the writer of his own tale, then the

proof of this is the bulky novel in the reader's hands. And in fact his block is psychological only in

the sense that it is a resistance to the amorality of the atrocities he witnesses on the shore; because Huck addresses the problem in his narrative, it becomes a marker of his humanism and moral sense. Huck does not consider his adventure on the river with Jim in general, or for that matter his bold decision to free Jim at the risk of "hell," to be as harrowing as the nightmare he encounters when he finds himself caught in the crossfire of the feuding families. The trouble on the shore as an ephemeral metafictional crisis nevertheless rehearses the ambiguity of the "trouble" with book-writing Huck expresses in the novel's final lines, and his desire to go silent as a writer henceforth, which has sometimes been taken as an "evasion" of the moral and political complexity of the story. In fact it is only evasion if one takes Huck too easily at his word. To think of Huck's "trouble" as a struggle of craft is a mistake, and a critical evasion of how Twain opens his novel, the ironic "Notice" where he challenges the reader to take the boy Huck and his adventure seriously: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot" (5). Huck's final renunciation of literature, and thus his entire story, is ambiguous by design, and, insofar as all of *Huckleberry Finn* is a complex parable in political morality hiding in plain sight, it is essentially a litmus test for the reader. In other words, it is possible to take Huck at his word, and to suppose the "trouble" of Huckleberry Finn is part of his general resistance to the education proposed by Aunt Sally, and a most basic kind of writer's block: that of the student coming into language and resisting the conventions and practices of serious adult discourse. Unless, of course, one has read the novel and been moved even to the slightest degree by Huck's perception and accidental eloquence, by the novel's Ellisonian "complex of experience"—the question of the morality of Jim's enslavement, the problem of Huck's limited power to free him, and the entanglement of Huck's destiny with Jim's on the raft—which Twain brilliantly deadpans as a mere child's dilemma. The moral and political significance of *Huckleberry Finn*, in other words, which many critics of the novel have eschewed or

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made excuses for, and which Ellison sought to promote, is hardly didactic, nor is it extraneous to the art or craft of the novel. Rather it is inextricable from craft: in Huck's "trouble," the problem of relating the story of one's harrowing experience with a difficult issue of political morality and the problem of finding a language in which to do so are versions of the same thing. In fact, it is not going too far to say that Huck's "trouble" *is* the text of the novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which is simultaneously an affair of craft *and* political morality.

In a page from a draft of an early version of the essay "Society, Morality, and the Novel," there are several revealing sentences that further explain Ellison's reading of Hemingway and Huck Finn. He wrote, regarding Hemingway's elided remark that the reader should put down *Huckleberry Finn* "when the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys,"

> To ignore this basic issue [that Jim should not have been enslaved] is to cut down the measure of the social will and to narrow the field of the American novel. Hemingway was withdrawing narrowing [sic] his frame so that he could get his work done, and his influence led to a restriction of focus on the part of those who tried to see through his vision. Perhaps they were able to see other things quite vividly but they missed much of what Twain meant them to see, and by failing to see the problem went unsolved. (Ms. Box I: 106, Folder 26, n.p.)

Ellison identifies a fundamental quality of *Huckleberry Finn* in his remarks on Hemingway and Twain, and through them he describes a fundamental problem for American literary criticism. What is now called novelistic craft simply wasn't separable for Twain from the moral dimension of *Huckleberry Finn*, from the argument it makes about the political question of race in the 1880s. It was also this way for Ellison. But notice how, in a draft, Ellison was willing to admit that Hemingway's blindness is probably what allowed him to generate his fiction, to "get his work done." Bradley is right to imagine "Ellison was grappling with writerly conflicts, not psychological ones," just as it is important

to acknowledge Ellison's awareness that to "cut down the measure of the social will" could allow a writer to focus on the process of writing as such, that is to say on *craft*. But it is more important to recognize that Ellison was ultimately unwilling to make such a sacrifice himself. His theory of the cultural function of the novel did not allow it. As a result, he found himself deep in Huck's "trouble": the ambiguous term by which Twain demarcates the power and peril of literary art that holds itself accountable to social and political, as well as to individual, morality, and the problematic means by which difficult stories get told.

For Invisible Man, the problem of writing went beyond "trouble." It was "torture" (579) although in his own sign-off, which occurs in the novel's epilogue, Invisible Man offers less of a renunciation of writing than Huck, and more perspective on the meaning of his act. So it is with Ellison, who is a Huck with metafictional vision, not to mention the additional optimism and disappointment afforded by his own experience of race in the twentieth century US. It is, of course, a mistake to locate Ellison's sign-off in the ending of *Invisible Man*. Huck sought to "light out for the territory" in order to evade education and further self-reflection (although perhaps not successfully, Twain dares the reader to suppose, since the status of slavery in new states such as Kansas escalated tensions leading up the Civil War). Ellison, by contrast, expressed his plans to Albert Murray in an April 9, 1953 letter to head for the territory where he was raised, Oklahoma, and "scout the southwest" in order to cultivate the passion needed to write his next book ("I've got to get real mad again, *and* talk with the old folks a bit. I've got *one* Okla. Book in me I do believe" (*Trading Twelves* 44, italics original)). The "torture" of writing *Invisible Man* earned Ellison his place in the American canon. The problem of assessing Ellison today is the question of what constitutes the continuation of Ellison's "trouble," and where, in Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* work, does he finally "light out"? Surely Ellison's reflections on literature in the essays, which bear significantly on how we ought to read his own work, are part of the Ellison oeuvre that should be analyzed and taught. But where

does it become "cheating," as Hemingway would have it, to think of unpublished, archival materials as part of the canonical Ellison? In particular, since *Three Days Before the Shooting* is now available and will become the primary channel to the post-*Invisible Man* novel work, how should we best approach that text, which offers a problematic, but nevertheless compelling and portable, glimpse of the Library of Congress archives?

Shadows Present: An Alternate Hermeneutic for Reading Ellison's Second Novel

For the reader and critic alike, the most important thing to acknowledge about Ellison's second novelistic production is neither its incompleteness nor the fact that Ellison was unable to finish and publish the document in the four decades he spent working on it. It is how, *despite* more than forty years of revisions and expansions, Ellison's second novel manuscripts remain an incredibly difficult body of work for the reader to imaginatively enter and interpret. This is so even when its various overlapping fragments are considered individually, and even with the extensive guidance provided by Callahan and Bradley in the new edition. The problem derives from the way the work's very important philosophical inquiry, which is a pursuit of the question of how racial ambiguity and repressed cultural identity destabilizes the order of American politics, is hopelessly complicated by the incompatibility of the unfinished novel's various fragments and various literary missions. Like *Invisible Man*, this is a work that aspires to capture the ambiguities and paradoxes of race, to be a litmus test for the reader's prejudice, and to be an argument for tolerance *amid* the complexity of American race relations. It seeks to offer the reader a mirror, or rather a series of mirrors, reflecting readerly experience in order to challenge assumptions about race and culture. But because Ellison does not seem to have worked out the matter of how the most important characters of the novel are connected—Senator Sunraider, the elderly preacher Reverend Hickman, the assassin Severen, and the journalist Welbourne McIntyre—at least two of whom are very significantly

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designed to be racially ambiguous (Severen and Sunraider), it becomes a hall of mirrors instead. The most basic critical—and, as Callahan and Bradley attest, editorial—exercises of determining who and what are essential features of the text, of working out which connections and ambiguities to trust as literary design and which to discard as the shortcomings of a work in progress, are all but overwhelming. It is a little like trying to make sense of the plot data offered in the four radically different sections of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, only without the assurance that Faulkner knew the full providence of the fictional history his various narrators offer only through glimpses rendered through the lenses of their respective psychologies. The problem is that there is no mapable Yoknapatawpha County to which Ellison's incomplete manuscripts refer. There is only a half-realized fictional rendering of the complex, real sociopolitical landscape of American race relations during the Civil Rights Movement, and Ellison's strange, uncompromising persistence amid it.

The great challenge of separating the two competing types of ambiguities present in *Three Days*—the ambiguities of race in the US, and the ambiguities generated by the text's incompleteness—affects the reader's most basic experience of the novel opening chapters. In the new edition, these chapters belong to Welbourne McIntyre, the white journalist through whose perspective the shooting of Senator Sunraider on the floor of the US Senate is first rendered. Consider, for instance, the subtle verb tense shifts that take place almost from the start of the first chapter in McIntyre's narration. Although the account of the initial drama of Senator Sunraider's shooting in the US Capitol begins authoritatively in the past tense—"Understand me, I was there; sitting in the press section at the start of the shooting" (13)—it unexpectedly drops into the present tense as the drama of the shooting begins to accelerate: "The effect is electric. Suddenly the gunman throws down his weapon and seems to freeze, waiting" (14). This may, of course, be an intentional stylistic move designed to heighten the immediacy of the narrative. Tense shifts are a device Ellison

uses periodically in *Invisible Man* to illustrate how things look in memory through the "mind's eye" (35).[79] Perhaps in this case the slippage is designed to illustrate an interpretable moment where McIntyre, in the telling of his story, gets so caught up in the chaos of the events he witnessed that he accidentally shifts the mode of his narration as they begin to accelerate. But the novel does not, in the end, grant the reader access to McIntyre's role in the larger shooting drama. It could just as easily be that this instance of tense slippage provides an occasion to mull whether Ellison may not have settled on the perspective he wished his narrator to convey, or, for that matter, whether he had even decided how much time has passes between the moment when the event of the shooting takes place and the moment of the story's telling (which, as the years stacked up following the moment Ellison first conceived of McIntyre in the 1950s, may very well have lengthening in Ellison's vision of the novel as well). On this possibility hinges the question of whether this particular fragment of the novel is merely a disoriented account of the shooting by a first-person narrator, who has yet to work out the meaning of a set of dramatic, politically significant events for himself, or, as it seems elsewhere in the fragment, whether McIntyre casts the events of the shooting to create a certain experience for the reader. For the reader encountering Ellison's second novel for the first time in the volume *Three Days* (versus *Juneteenth*), where the McIntyre fragment is the volume's opening gambit, one of the most intriguing possibilities for understanding McIntyre is undoubtedly as a kind of speaker in a large scale dramatic monologue. "*Understand me, I was there; sitting in the press section at the start of the shooting*": McIntyre's opening line makes him seem an emissary who has returned unscathed from the scene of a complex social drama, a Miles Coverdale or a Nathan Zuckerman who will provide the reader a new vision of a set of known but misunderstood events. Like those narrators, there is reason to wonder whether McIntyre may be more involved than he claims in the shooting. McIntyre's presence at several events preceding the shooting can seem more than

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[79] See the opening pages of Chapter Two in *Invisible Man* for an example of Ellison's care in deploying this device.

coincidental, suggesting Ellison may have wanted his reader to take McIntyre as an unreliable narrator, or at least as a storyteller with complex motives.[80] Alternately, it is tempting to wonder if McIntyre has been traumatized by the experience of witness the shooting or otherwise psychologically disturbed by some event or set of events from his past, and if the sometimes erratic structure of Book I—the dream sequences of an experience McIntyre had in World War Two (Chapter Eight), as well as the memories of an early relationship McIntyre had with an African American woman in Harlem (Chapter Nine)—is intended to be an expression of the difficulty of returning to tell the story, as in a text such as William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved.* But the fact that the fragment is unfinished, and more importantly un-sutured to the other fragments of the novel, makes it impossible to know conclusively if any of these critical assumptions, which are the basic building blocks of any close reading, are appropriate.

This can be hard to accept for the reader familiar with Ellison's work. Ellison is highly capable of rendering representational paradigms that are at once complex and stable, if his remarkable production in *Invisible Man* can stand as evidence for his basic abilities as a fiction writer. Consider his expert negotiation of his historical reference to Booker T. Washington in that novel. Early in the book, just before the beginning of the notorious battle royal scene, Invisible Man explains, "In my pre-invisible days I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington" (18), bringing Washington to bear as a historical figure on the world of this novel. Because Washington appears here to exist in the world of *Invisible Man* as he does in historical reality, throughout the chapters of the book that take place at the black college the reader assumes that the college is the Tuskegee Institute, which Washington founded and which Ellison really attended. The frequent references to the "Founder" seem accordingly to be simply campus jargon for Washington. As it is

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[80] Callahan and Bradley draw attention to this trend in their preface to one of the computer fragments they include in the volume, "McIntyre at Jessie Rockmore's." Although Ellison's final intentions are unclear, "it appears that Ellison likely conceived this scene as a pivot point in the narrative, marking the confluence of Hickman, Sunraider, and McIntyre and conceivably knotting the various narrative threads" (927).

well known, the "bronze statue" described in the novel, the statue of "the college Founder…his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave" (36), refers to a real statue of Washington on the Tuskegee campus. Ellison's insistence upon calling the college founder of his novel "the Founder," and the college merely "the college," thus hardly suggests that the world of *Invisible Man* is a reality that has departed from our own. Presumably, Ellison does this merely to limit his liability as the writer of a fictional representation of a politically controversial figure; under the signifier "the Founder," Ellison can say more about Washington than he could otherwise, even though the attentive reader knows that Washington has a presence in this book. And Ellison doesn't waste the opportunity: famously, Invisible Man remarks, regarding the statue, that he is "unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place" (36).[81]

But Ellison significantly complicates his argument about Washington midway through the novel when he suddenly includes a new reference to the real, historical Washington, who apparently does not correspond to the Founder after all. The moment arrives once Invisible Man has made his way to New York, when Brother Jack of the communist "Brotherhood" asks Invisible Man, "How would you like to be the new Booker T. Washington?" (305), that is to say an orator and political motivator. Invisible Man finds the possibility preposterous—that is a dream he left behind in his experience at the battle royal. Then he announces, to the momentary confusion of the reader, that he doesn't think Washington "was as great as the Founder," eliciting a debate with Brother Jack, which reveals a great deal about the inner workings of this novel:

> [Invisible Man:] "Well, in the first place, the Founder came before him and did

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[81] The abstract renaming has the additional effect of de-racializing the Founder. By referring to this figure simply as "the Founder," the responsibility for assuming the Founder's race rests on the reader. In effect, by accepting "the Founder" as a placeholder for Washington in the world of *Invisible Man*, the reader is provided an opportunity to imagine that Washington, figuratively speaking, might as well have been white, a politically incendiary prospect given that Washington is often criticized as a proponent of rudimentary black education within the white establishment who parlayed too readily to white interests.

practically everything Booker T. Washington did and a lot more. And more people

believed in him. You hear a lot of arguments about Booker T. Washington, but few

would argue about the Founder…"

[Brother Jack:] "No, but perhaps that is because the Founder lies outside history,

while Washington is still a living force. However, the *new* Washington shall work for

the poor…" (306, ellipses original)

Notice the complexity of what has transpired in this extraordinary exchange. In the first half of the

novel, Ellison referred to Washington under the straightforward variable "the Founder," presumably

in order to preserve fictional license. Here we discover Washington is actually distinct from the

Founder inside the world of the novel, and that he has been so all along, even when Invisible Man

meditates on the bronze statue. As it turns out, both figures are so prominent that it is possible to

debate Washington's political impact versus that of the Founder. This isn't a thinly veiled version of

one man's surreal experience of our world after all, the reader discovers significantly, nor was

Invisible Man's expression of his uncertainty over whether the Founder is raising or lowering the

veil from the eyes of the former slave an act of straightforward protest. Instead, Ellison confirms, it

was from the beginning an allegorized version of our world, with Washington grafted into it to serve

some subtler rhetorical aim.

For our purposes, it is enough to comment upon the extraordinary level of fictional control

Ellison demonstrates with this move, which is an excellent example of how novelistic craft and

political morality can coincide in Ellison's art. Its meaning pivots on the reader's ability to maintain

faith in Ellison's powers as a literary artist, even as he suspends the representational stability of

Invisible Man. For the way it paradoxically calls attention to the artifice of Ellison's novel and yet, in

the end, accelerates the novel's sophistication in the hands of the reader willing to accept a moment

of cognitive dissonance, the moment is a little like the scene in *Huckleberry Finn* where Huck and Jim

encounter a wrecked steamboat named the "Walter Scott" (133). As a striking image recalling Huck's

rejection of the romantic tradition early in the novel,[82] the rendering of the influential novelist's

reputation as a Mississippi River steamboat shipwreck prompts a double-take on the part of the

reader, and, if one is familiar with Sir Walter Scott's novels and their influence on the social and

political values of the antebellum South, to reconsider Twain's novel as a reaction to Scott.[83] Both

moves allow important historical allusions to signify inside novelistic worlds that represent parallel

histories, forcing the reader to wonder how Scott and Washington, respectively, might bear on

Huckleberry Finn and *Invisible Man* and the larger relation of those texts to history. Both moves seek to

open metafictional dimensions in their respective texts, and through them to advance historical

arguments.[84]

Both texts, in other words, achieve a level of representational stability that makes it possible

for the reader to track historical arguments—arguments bearing on broad social and political

currents—without venturing far outside the text into history or intertextual allusion. Even though

the ability of *Invisible Man* to speak for current racial realities may be declining with the progress of

integration, as Warren suggests, its art and meaning are coextensive with its engagement of the

sociopolitical landscape of its time. But it is far more difficult to know how to approach the

historical dimension in the unfinished *Three Days*—its allusions and intertext—from the text of *Three*

Days alone, even though it works with many of the same ambiguities and cultural problems as

Invisible Man. To close read Ellison's work, where craft and morality do not simply coexist but where

they constitute versions of the same thing, is to be directed to history always. Even a formalist

reading of *Invisible Man* becomes a historical reading, because Ellison sought to create a document

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[82] Huck plays a skeptical Sancho Panza to Tom Sawyer's romantic fantasies when Tom seeks to attack a Sunday school picnic, claiming that the group is actually "a crowd of Spaniards and A-rabs," and advises Huck that he wouldn't be "so ignorant" if he had "read a book called 'Don Quixote.'" (41).
[83] Twain was famously critical of Scott elsewhere. See Chapter 46, *Life on the Mississippi.* 1883. Scituate, MA: Digital Scanning, 2000. 391-395.

that engaged the cultural problems of his own time as literary art. But the kind of evidence required to articulate a plausible reading of *Three Days* is much harder to identify and attain, because of the work's incompleteness and because of the level of editorial intervention required to bring us into its imagined world. As Bradley would have it, the incompleteness of the second novel is an opportunity for the "critical imagination" (4), on par with the "freedom" Ellison "seems to have found in the open-ended manuscript" (17). For him the "compositional complexity" of the novel offers a challenge, but also an encounter with "unfettered possibility": "Sunraider can die, or somehow live on; first-person narration can take the place of third-person, or both can coexist alongside each other without the necessity of resolution" (4). But Ellison's conception of the novel was much more in line with Georg Lukàcs pre-modernist conception of the genre as "half-art," and a variant on the imperfect form of the epic.[85] As it was for Ellison, for Lukàcs "the novel, in contrast to other genres whose existence resides within the finished form, appears as something in process of becoming. That is why, from the artistic viewpoint, the novel is the most hazardous genre, and why it has been described as only half an art by many who equate *having a problematic* with *being problematic*" (73, italics original). The critic who seeks to make a concrete argument about the meaning of Ellison's text, one that receives Ellison's own notion of the historical and cultural function of the novel, cannot evade the pursuit of stable placeholders on the basis of the book's incompleteness and obvious imperfection.

The most productive means of approaching *Three Days* critically is not with the eye finely attuned to reading highly crafted modernist or post-modern novels, nor is it with the editor's eye practiced in tracking an author's revisions over time. Rather, it is with the same broad, over-

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[85] For Lukàcs, the epic and the novel "differ from one another not by their authors' fundamental intentions but by the given historico-philosophical realities with which the authors were confronted" (56). They represent the same basic impulse, to track human experience in the context of "totality," and differ only insofar as the epic receives and reflects established social and cultural forms, whereas the novel gives form: "[t]he epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life" (60).

ambitious vision Ellison brought to his own project, which, like the ending chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*, can feel like "cheating" because it boldly attempts to engage a crisis in American political morality that it cannot resolve. One sample of this approach that has managed to generate a compelling reading of Ellison's second novel, while avoiding almost entirely questions of its incompleteness, is Michael Szalay's essay "Ralph Ellison's Unfinished Second Skin" (2011). Notably, Szalay refuses to take for granted the most unique feature of *Three Days*, which is far more important to recognize than the story of its production: the fact that its core scene does not simply reflect on American culture and politics synecdochically, but that it takes place in the seat of US government. As a result, he manages to take seriously not only the historical situation of period of the novel's composition, but its quality as an American epic. Using the volume as a guide to the archive, but returning to the Library of Congress when necessary, Szalay works to identify Senator Sunraider's political phenotype rather than his genotype as a literary character., and effectively extends Ellison's gesture in *Three Days* by supposing that the "reversals" in which Ellison traded were not technical difficulties he could not resolve, but deliberate gestures toward a rather profound argument about American politics: that the two American political parties have always been involved in "dialectical reversals," and that "the Civil Rights movement was meeting furious political resistance during the fifties because the parties were changing in relation to each other" (821).[86] Ellison presented this possibility only incompletely in *Three Days*, but Szalay pursues what is "significantly new" about Ellison's text in spite of the editorial and technical difficulties his manuscripts present. The critical problem of how to approach the incomplete, mediated archive of Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* novel manuscripts does not paralyze Szalay from pursuing the same political history Ellison sought to

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[86] For Szalay, Sunraider, who is from the South but who ends up becoming a senator from a northeastern state, represents at first potential civil rights advocate like Lyndon B. Johnson. In the end, however, he "expresses" the weakened potential for progress of "the dialectical nature of Kennedy's liberalism" (819); Kennedy's politically motivated courting of the black electorate and what Szalay perceives as his emulation of African American style even as he is known to make obviously racist, demeaning statements.

engage, and he tracks Ellison's engagement convincingly. By focusing on Ellison's probable sociopolitical argument, by presupposing the importance of social and political morality to Ellison's art—and how could politics *not* be the most important aspect of a novel whose central event takes place in the US Capitol?—Szalay takes the basic structures of Ellison seriously despite the "compositional complexity" of the manuscripts underlying the volume. He manages this through his broad perspective despite the fact that the reader's experience of Ellison's text is significantly mediated by editorial intervention, providing a compelling reading of Ellison's unfinished text that does not undermine the novelist or contribute to the accidental generation of a block myth as byproduct.

Reading *Three Days* with a broad vision, hunting for large-scale resonances and intertextual engagements rather than unreliable formal details, there is also substantial evidence that Ellison sought to make a literary historical argument in *Three Days*. Specifically, McIntyre's narrative may constitute another response by Ellison to *Benito Cereno*, Herman Melville's 1855 novella about an American captain's misreading of a slave rebellion on a Spanish slave ship he encounters off the coast of Chile. [87] The opening scene offered by McIntyre, in particular, strongly echoes the chaotic pivotal moment in Melville's tale when Benito Cereno, captain of the derelict slave ship, jumps over the ship's bulwarks to avoid certain death, bewildering the American Captain Delano. In both texts, it takes a considerable amount of time for the meaning of what has happened to register, because the worldviews of both Delano and McIntyre, which roughly govern the transmission of the respective narratives containing them, prevent them from admitting that an inversion of social order along racial lines could have possibly taken place. Here is the scene from *Benito Cereno*, which commences just as Captain Delano's tender is far enough away from the slave ship to drop its oars:

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[87] Ellison invokes Captain Delano's provocative question from the end of the novella as the first of two epigraphs to *Invisible Man*: "'You are saved,' cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; 'you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?'" (qtd. xxv).

> The instant that was done, Don Benito sprang over the bulwarks, falling at the feet of Captain Delano; at the same time calling towards his ship, but in tones so frenzied, that none in the boat could understand him. But, as if not equally obtuse, three sailors, from three different and distant parts of the ship, splashed into the sea, swimming after their captain, as if intent upon his rescue. (87)

And here is the correlating scene in *Three Days*, which occurs when the Senator is shot by his estranged son from the visitor's gallery in the US Senate chamber.

> Seizing the incongruous images of the man on the rail [the assassin Severn], the old Negro [the Reverend Hickman], and the struggling guard, my mind leaps ahead on a wave of heat and nausea, lifting me from my chair. For a moment the gunman stares straight at the old Negro, then, violently shaking his head, he was gone, plunged calmly over the railing. (14)

The passages differ in that Melville's is written in free, indirect discourse, providing access to Delano's perspective even though it is a third-person narrative, whereas McIntyre's remark is a first-person recollection. Quite like Delano, nevertheless, McIntyre has little notion of the significance of what has just transpired "over the railing." He, too, cannot yet work out the logic behind the series of "incongruous images" he has witnessed, including the relationship between the Senator and Hickman, the "huge old whiteheaded Negro" who perplexingly comes to the racist Senator's defense (14), denouncing the gunman's act. Additionally, both McIntyre and Delano mistake complex political tragedy for burlesque. McIntyre: "And all of this over Senator Sunraider! I was convinced that it all began as an act to confuse us. And more likely than not this man Hickman is a charlatan, a flunky hired by Sunraider himself in one of his endless tricks of political showmanship which, through some unfortunate miscalculation, blew up in his face" (15). Melville's narrator: "The dismayed officer of the boat eagerly asked what this meant. To which, Captain Delano, turning a

disdainful smile upon the unaccountable Spaniard, answered that, for his part, he neither knew nor cared; but it seemed as if Don Benito had taken it into his head to produce the impression among his people that [Delano's] boat wanted to kidnap him" (87). Although the Melville passage arrives after much of the narrative of *Benito Cereno* has taken place while Ellison's occurs at the beginning of McIntyre's story, the scenes strongly recall one another.

Additional evidence for a possible Melvillian legacy in *Three Days* can be found in Chapter Two of McIntyre's narrative. Amid the "absolute chaos" and "shocked depression" of the sealed Capitol in the moments after the shooting, a mixed group of reporters and congressmen begin "speculating as to the nature of the Negroes' involvement in the shooting" (17). "I tell you they're part of the plot" (17), one man announces, in the first line of dialogue of McIntyre's fragment, recalling Delano's suspicion of the Spaniard and the American captain's attempts to identify a plot in the murk of Benito Cereno's actions (Delano's exclamation when Benito Cereno leaps over the gunwale, and he sees the slave-rebellion leader Babo's dagger and believes it is meant for him rather than Cereno: "this plotting pirate means murder!" (87)). Later in the same conversation, a reporter identified as "the hysterical man," who is likely the same man who utters the "plot" remark, advises, against pleas for calm, "Sir, this is no kidding matter. You should study the history of terrorism, of brainwashing, *the uprising in Santo Domingo*, the Nat Turner rebellion!" (19, italics mine). This remark may or may not signify an intertextual reference to the San Dominick, which is the allusive name of Benito Cereno's ship, but it most certainly repeats Melville's gesture by imagining that the Haitian uprising, and through it the broader history of slavery in the New World, bears a legacy on subsequent historical events, however fictionally rendered. In its implied interrogation of how seemingly stable power-structures drawn along racial lines can be rapidly disrupted through unexpected violence, it raises exactly the question Melville raised in *Benito Cereno* (and, for that matter, which Ellison also raises in *Invisible Man*).

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Although they are presented from inside the murky represented world of Ellison's incomplete novel, serious, unambiguous questions about social and political morality become an apparatus offering an opportunity to deconstruct the problem of his unfinished work at large. "You should study the history of terrorism, of brainwashing, the uprising in Santo Domingo": to the sensibility of the twenty-first century reader, Ellison's remark may seem an instance of not-so-subtly embedded didacticism. But because we cannot be sure of Ellison's intention, or if the Santo Domingo passage would have even made it into the complete novel Ellison theoretically might have published from the McIntyre fragment, Ellison's failure to resolve the question of what it meant to rewrite the novelistic problematic of *Benito Cereno* in the seat of US government—no matter where it took place in the complex backstage recesses of *Three Days*—cannot represent his technical failure. It represents rather a collective failure to confront the moral, epic question of the extent to which race still determines political power in America. He repeats Melville's question, insistently, even though, like Melville—like Benito Cereno—he cannot answer it satisfactorily. The extent to which we wonder over Ellison's inability to finish *Three Days,* the extent to which we become obsessed with the block as a technical matter, as a matter of craft, is thus the extent to which we allow our block to stand in for his and refuse to acknowledge Ellison's impulse to ask difficult questions of political morality as part of the art of the novel.

In an unpublished, undated letter to John Callahan written sometime between in the mid-1980s, Ellison, thinking back to his experience in the Merchant Marine during World War Two, wrote candidly about the special ability of "shipbound" life to transform an existing social order. He explains,

> there's nothing like being shipbound on an ocean with German submarines aiming at
> its [sic] butt to make white Americans forget some of their racial prejudice. For who
> knows, when a torpedo strikes the guy in the position to give you a helping hand

might well be a Negro. Of course the reverse is also true: some rabid racist might

well forget his hate and safe a black man's life. Melville knew what he was doing

when he isolated American democracy on a whaling ship… ((Ms. Box II: 26, Folder

24, 3, ellipsis original)

Captain Delano's ship, the Bachelor's Delight, was a "sealer and general trader" and not a whaling

ship (Melville 35), and so Ellison presumably refers here to the ethnic diversity of the crew of the

Pequod in *Moby-Dick* rather than to the sailors who people the world of *Benito Cereno*. What he

expresses regardless, before trailing off with an ellipsis, is his awareness of something Melville

"knew" well, which surely bore on the production of *Benito Cereno*: that a given set of human

relations, two examples of which are a democracy and a novel, attains a higher potential for

transcendence when it functions in an "isolated" setting. To put it in Ellison's published words from

earlier in his career, by "giving resonance to a specific complex of experience until…that specific

part of life speaks metaphorically for the whole" ("Society" 242), the logic of synecdoche, is perhaps

the most efficient way to achieve the "significantly new" (239). When in the 1950s Ellison conceived

and began writing a novel about a racially fraught political assassination that takes place on the floor

of the US Senate, he knew better than anyone that he was stretching this rule of craft very thin and

making things very difficult for himself. The problem of completing the form for such a novel

proved, in the end, insurmountable. Ellison couldn't have known the extent to which the history of

the 1960s and 1970s, the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement and the assassinations of John F.

Kennedy, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., would not only lend

"resonance" to his novel idea about a political assassination, but fundamentally alter its historical

meaning. Yet the extent to which the progress of history changed Ellison's process and undermined

his novel's completion as a problem of craft is not only probably impossible to track, it is beside the

point: Ellison surely knew he was engaging a highly mutable, volatile historical context when he

decided to write a novel set in the US Capitol. Had he completed his novel before 1960, when he conceived its major components, it seems likely that its historical contingency would have been all the more conspicuous, as conspicuous as the publication of *Benito Cereno* in 1855 has seemed to modern readers who cannot but look to that text from across the historical event of the about-to-erupt Civil War, even though, obviously, neither Melville nor Ellison could actually read the palm of history.

Kenneth Warren is right. When Ellison raises the question of race, he does so because for him that question is disturbingly real, and an effect of the persistent cultural logic of Jim Crow, in which he too is inscribed. But Ellison's impulse to make art from history—even racist history—is not his weakness. It is merely his anachronism: his willingness to ask moral questions amid a literary culture influenced by the craft-priorities of a modernism that views moral questions as incompatible with craft concerns. This is the unblocked Ellison's literary historical significance: he reminds us incompletely, anachronistically, and through heartbreaking example as well as through the concise prose of his essays, that the often messy components of novels treating social and political morality are worth exactly as much trouble—and as much critical consideration—as any achievement of novelistic craft.

Until very recently, ending a study on writer's block in American literature and culture with a discussion of Philip Roth would have seemed absurd. Although Roth has treated block as a subject in his created worlds, most directly in the novel *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), the writer's twenty-nine original book-length works generally place him at the opposite end of the American literary production spectrum. One of the most acclaimed living American writers, Roth has been awarded virtually every major literary prize except for the Nobel, and he has become the first writer to collaborate during own lifetime with The Library of America to release volumes of his collected works. Roth's production is marked by several periods during which he released new novels on an annual basis, and he is famous for his self-imposed isolation in rural Connecticut and a monastic devotion to his work.[88] Compared to the other authors I address in this study, many of whom only published a handful of novels during their lifetimes, Roth is more prolific by several orders of magnitude, whether his achievement is calculated in terms of raw manuscript output, published work, popular celebrity, or critical significance.

Nevertheless, since October 7, 2012, when the French magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* published an interview where Roth seems to announce that he stopped writing after the novel *Nemesis* (2010)—"I decided that I was done with fiction. I don't want to read any more of it, write any more of it, I don't even want to talk about it anymore" (Kaprielian)—the American media has already begun to refigure Roth's career in the terms of a block myth: a cultural myth which suggests that there is something precarious about literary production, that literary talent can be spent. Under sensationalist headlines (*Salon*, "Philip Roth: 'I'm Done'"; *The New Yorker*, "Philip Roth Says Enough"; *The New York Times,* "Goodbye, Frustration: Pen Put Aside, Roth Talks"), Roth's announcement was misconstrued from the earliest accounts, initially insofar as it was reported as

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[88] See Remnick, David. "Into the Clear." *The New Yorker* 8 May 2000. 76-89. Print.

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news. The remarks to *Les Inrockuptibles* were not only published a full months before the English-language media picked up on the relatively undramatic "announcement" in a foreign magazine, but they were actually retrospective, referring to the period following the publication of *Nemesis* when Roth reread all of his work backwards up to *Portnoy's Complaint* and decided "I'd actually done all right…It's enough!" (Kaprielian). According to David Remnick, they were also merely "a definitive version of what [Roth] has been telling friends privately for a couple of years" ("Philip Roth Says Enough")). Then, in early November, a block myth—the idea that a writer has somehow suffered a moral or intellectual crisis, and has become unable to generate fiction—reared its head as such, when Adam Gopnik pivoted on Roth's retirement to make a point about American moral righteousness in the November 26 issue of *The New Yorker*. Invoking the humanism of novels such as *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Human Stain* to explain how moral scandal threatens the stability of American public life only insofar as it provides an opportunity for blackmail, Gopnik jokes that the sex scandal involving CIA Director David Petraeus and his biographer, which galvinized the nation in November 2012, might have silenced Roth. Citing Roth's "fifty-year-old assertion that you can't write good satirical fiction in America because reality will quickly outdo anything you might invent," Gopnik asserts,

> The really big news of the week was that Roth had stopped writing fiction, for reasons of his own, one gathers, though it isn't hard to imagine him awed into silence by what American reality had once again wrought. Let's hope that a novelist's retirement may be, like a soprano's, quickly reversible. (20)

This latest paroxysm of the puritanical moral standards of American politics, Gopnik supposes, where the spectacle of a general's extramarital affair toppled his reputation more or less instantaneously, might have short-circuited the imagination of a prolific novelist. It is as if Roth had been walking a line over the abyss of writer's block all along.

Like most of *The New Yorker*'s "Talk of the Town" opinion segments, Gopnik's article is semi-comical. It would be overreading to take his misrepresentation of the timeline of Roth's retirement as a serious argument about Roth's career and work. Media coverage of the affair between General Petraeus and his biographer *didn't* silence the author of *The Human Stain*, and Gopnik plays on this; the absurdity that Roth might have gone silent is what makes Gopnik's joke possible. The joke nevertheless illustrates how *The New Yorker*'s audience—predominately liberal, affluent consumers of culture—must perceive the morally realistic novelist in our time. Originally, Gopnik deploys the philosophical lesson of *The Human Stain* as a way of rethinking the Petraeus scandal, implying that Roth's novel has a relevant moral theory to offer Americans. We ought to "recall, from 'The Human Stain,' the narrator's dream at the height of the Clinton imbroglio, someone had hung a banner from the White House reading 'A Human Being Lives Here'" (20). Yet by suggesting the Petraeus scandal might have "awed" Roth "into silence," Gopnik offers a different possibility: that Roth's creativity might become overloaded in response to a national crisis of political morality. Even though Roth imagined and published the intricate, fictional Coleman Silk scandal in *The Human Stain*, where a classics professor at a small college in rural Massachusetts finds himself doubly disgraced for uttering a racial slur in the classroom and beginning an affair at the age of seventy-one with an illiterate, thirty-four-year-old janitor, Gopnik writes Roth's announcement of his supposed departure from fiction writing into the mass media narrative of the Petraeus scandal. American moral scandal—Roth's "human stain"—apparently contaminates everyone, including its gifted analyst Philip Roth. Roth's moral insight in *The Human Stain* thus becomes refigured as his professional liability, even as he is honored anew for its continuing relevance.

The Roth retirement "scandal" is still unfolding, and it remains to be seen whether it will prove permanent. I end this study with it, however, to show the protean mutability of the myth of writer's block, which can even touch the reputation of one of the most prolific American authors

(albeit in the form of a joke), and which coincides with a writer's status as an interpreter of morality. The problem with Gopnik's formulation is not his notion that confronting moral reality in an American context is difficult. Nor is his citation of Roth inaccurate. In the 1960 essay Gopnik paraphrases "Writing American Fiction," originally a talk delivered at Stanford University sponsored by *Esquire* magazine, Roth really did claim that American moral reality can "outdo" the fiction writer: "the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality…The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist" (120). Like Gopnik, Roth, too, imagines that American myth and scandal, as propagated by the media, compete with stories rendered in American fiction. Agreeing with Edmund Wilson, who "says that after reading *Life* magazine he feels that he does not belong to the country depicted there," Roth explains, "One would think that we might get a high proportion of historical novels or contemporary satire— or perhaps just nothing. No books" (121). For Roth and Gopnik alike, it *is* possible to imagine a writer "awed into silence by" American moral scandal, that a culture that produces through its own mechanisms a story like the Petraeus scandal might need "no books." But in the case of Roth, there are dozens of books, many of which explicitly address morality, not least of which is the novel *The Human Stain*, which Gopnik explicitly cites. Gopnik's citation of Roth thus constitutes a striking refiguration of Roth's 1960 theory. Rather than the vision of how American literature relates to American culture Roth would carry throughout his career—which would become his subject and make his career possible—Gopnik explains it as a disease to which Roth, too, would eventually succumb.

Like Nathaniel Hawthorne's figure "the scarlet letter," "the human stain" is a metaphor for the irrational persecution of human moral scandal. But both *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Human Stain* are more importantly books. The specific moral scandals their titles signify did not block the

production of literature; they engendered the published fictions with which they share their names, a process that is explicated within their respective represented worlds. In both texts, moral persecution functions as what Edgar Dryden has called an "enabling contaminant" (219-221), not a contagious, silencing force as Gopnik would have it. When Hawthorne finds Hester Prynne's scarlet "A" in the Salem Custom House, he claims—imagines—that it is intertwined with a transcript of Prynne's story (100-101), just as the notion of the "human stain" is transmitted within the world of Roth's novel from a remark made by Faunia, the supposedly illiterate, much younger woman with whom protagonist Coleman Silk takes up an affair, to Roth's narrator Nathan Zuckerman. To mistake Roth's fictional exploitation of moral scandal for psychologically damaging awareness is to imagine that he never wrote *The Human Stain* at all. When Gopnik jokes, "it isn't hard to imagine [Roth] awed into silence by what American reality had once again wrought," he imagines that a new vision of moral scandal might have blocked Philip Roth and caused his retirement. But moral scandal has always been Roth's greatest subject.

The peril of moral realism has a long American literary history. Even Nathaniel Hawthorne, when he purportedly holds the scarlet "A" to his breast in the bureaucratic dungeon of the Custom House, claims to feel "a sensation…as of burning heat" emanating from the mark of Hester Prynne's sin, and drops the emblem on the floor "involuntarily" (101). But significantly this does not stop Hawthorne, in his fictional introduction to his romance, from reading Surveyor Pue's account of Prynne's story and building upon it with "nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of [his] own invention" (102). In the twentieth century, the American novel's moral dimension has been marginalized in favor of psychological realism and formal experiment, a process set up by the priorities of modernism. After dropping the infamous scarlet "A," Hawthorne went on read—and then rewrite—the "small roll of dingy paper" on which Prynne's affair was ostensibly written (101). Moral realism in literary fiction was always a peril; now it is a writer's liability.

Writer's block is a cultural myth, which emerged from the rise of psychology as literature's major concern in the twentieth century. It has become a means of transferring the burden of complex, public moral questions to individual writers in crises of psychology of craft. Discarding block and looking hard at the work of Joseph Mitchell, Henry Roth, and Ralph Ellison reveals a set of writers who all confronted complex questions of American social and political morality. Their respective labors are incomplete, and their various successes irregular, but literary achievement and moral communication are the rare developments, not silence and block. The extent to which Philip Roth, perhaps the most prolific American moral realist, will be rendered in the terms of a block myth remains to be seen, but perhaps that developing story can serve as a litmus test.

In one of his post-*Principles* talks on the will, William James wrote, "If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem" ("Life" 61, italics original). The relevance of literary labor on a cosmic scale will always be in question; there will always be the chance that human communication, including the writing of an artful literary work, may be, ultimately, a "game of private theatricals," and withdrawal thus an act outside the field of "morality." There is no way of knowing if, or to what extent, the writing of a novel—or a poem, or a philosophical theory, or a critical essay—constitutes an act of redemption for an individual writer or a society, let alone for the universe. But the possibility of the cosmic relevance of human meaning is the moral question on which all literature—including literature that negates its own existence or imagines itself to be a withdrawal from communication—rests. In the universe at large, silence and block are never a scandal; they are, indiscriminately, the status quo. Human cultures that promote the writing, dissemination, and consumption of literary works are the incomplete, imperfect miracle.

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