The Postwar American Novel and Mr. Keynes: Literature in the Age of Stabilizing Economic Disequilibrium

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B.A. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2005

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy in the Program of English at Brown University

Providence, RI
May 2013
This dissertation by Austin C. Gorman is accepted in its present form by the Department of English as satisfying the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Austin C. Gorman’s early life is best captured by the Bruce Springsteen lyric “the first kick I took was when I hit the ground” from the popular 1984 single “Born in the U.S.A.” His first memories are of the industrial towers of that dotted the scrap-metal landscape of his Southeast Michigan hometown. Raised in a decent middleclass home to parents who emphasized the virtues of reading and education, with a brilliant mother and artistically-gifted father, Austin began his academic career at Henry Ford Community College. He soon transferred to the University of Michigan where he studied English literature and read the complete works of Michel Foucault (even The Order of Things). Graduating in 2005 with a B.A. in English, he worked for a brief spell in the jewelry industry, hawking diamonds in the tawdry underbelly of Detroit’s market for precious stones. In 2006, Austin entered Brown University’s PhD program in English literature, where he studied the postwar novel and 20th-century American culture. He has taught both English and writing courses at Brown University, and as an adjunct professor at Bryant University in Smithfield, RI. He has also worked for six years as a tutor and writing associate at Brown University’s Writing Center.
Acknowledgements

I have benefited from the support of a wide variety of people during the writing of this dissertation. I would like to especially thank Deak Nabers for playing such a formative role in my intellectual development. Without his guidance, this project would not have been possible. I also appreciate the generosity of my readers, Rolland Murray and Daniel Kim, and their assistance in creating and refining my arguments and chapters.

While at Brown, I have been especially lucky to be a part of the world’s greatest cohort of English graduate students. Yes, I’m talking about you Sarah Osment, Khristina Gonzalez, Jennifer Schnepf, Jeffrey Covington, Julia Shaw and Adriane Genette. I wish to give a special nod to David Liao for, among other things, standing up at my wedding, and his love of sun-kissed ham and Al Pacino. I’ve made many amazing friends at graduate school from other years, including Jeffrey Neilsen, Andrew Naughton, Angela Allen and Sachelle Ford. I will wish each and every one of you after I head off into the post-graduate school horizon.

My parents, Eric and Claudia Gorman, have been amazing in their consistent emotional and financial support. Absolutely none of this would have been possible without them. I would also like to acknowledge my mother-in-law and my father-in-law, MaryAnn and Dale Dunn, and their encouragement every step of the way.

Finally, the most important person in this process, I would like to thank Meredith Dunn, without whom I would truly be lost. Her humor, emotional support and kindness throughout this process have been nothing short of saintly.
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To my parents with love
Introduction: Keynesianism Then and Now

When the stock price of the investment giant Bear Stearns began to plummet in 2008, during a period that the former banker and current contemporary financial historian, William Cohan, describes with foreboding as those fateful “ten days in March,”¹ neither the stock analysts, bankers, journalists covering Wall Street—and certainly not the general public—was quite aware of the extent of the financial bloodletting that was about to be unleashed on the American economy. Mortgage-backed securities, essentially risk-of-consumer default packaged as equities and traded among financial players—investment banks, hedge funds, institutional investors, etc—in “shadow markets” outside of the public clearinghouses of the stock exchange, and therefore outside the purview of American financial regulatory bodies, initiated an economic catastrophe whose impact sent reverberations through the entire system. The fallout from the 2008 housing crisis is still being felt today, and while financial markets have recently rebounded, at least to some extent, America is still gripped by high unemployment rates and severe credit problems.

As with any economic catastrophe of this proportion, the question of its origins and root causes become intellectually compelling. How did this happen? The political economist Herman Schwartz gives one answer, explaining that housing market financing institutions in the U.S. and countries that mimicked America—those that offered flexible interest rates on mortgages—had the “greatest capacity to translate the [global] disinflation of the 1990s into increased demand and rising employment,” and used that

capacity to its fullest.\(^2\) Schwartz’s analysis is interesting because it dispenses with the usual narrative that the decreased manufacturing prowess of the U.S., which began to decline in the 1970s, shifted the economic impetus of the American system away from industrial production and toward increased financialization. Instead, as he argues “far from fleeing into financial activity as a way to response to a declining manufacturing sector, competitive U.S. manufacturers and service providers took control of their value chain” through a system of global financial arbitrage backed by expanding institutions of home refinancing.\(^3\) In short, cheap money in the US through home mortgage refinancing increased our consumer potency and appetite for foreign-produced exports.

Such a system was doomed to failure when it commenced during the 1980s and accelerated in the 1990s, because the capital that was generating this expansion of aggregate demand was based entirely on the continual rise in the value of home prices—a “housing bubble” that appears dubious in retrospective (although, all market bubbles appear dubious in hindsight). Without the lax borrowing standards and consistent opportunity of U.S. consumers to increase their purchasing power by refinancing their main source of equity—namely, their homes—to purchase greater quantities of foreign consumer exports, the expansion of the 1990s would have never occurred, but neither would the succeeding collapse of the millennial era. Finance, the power to purchase, the transactional medium through which goods and services are exchanged, and consumer commodities make for boon companions during economic expansion, but uncomfortable bedfellows during hard times. When American


\(^3\) Ibid, 138.
consumers during the 1990s were able to leverage their homes into increased purchasing power, feed by a mortgage industry that encouraged them to assume greater and greater levels of debt, and investment banks with a desire to securitize this debt into financial products for investors, foreign imports provided a plethora of consumer goods to expend this capital on. According to the thesis put forward by Schwartz’s book, by outsourcing manufacturing, the American economy was actually in a better position to strive during a period he refers to as “the long 1990s.”

Of course, this economic expansion was not felt equally among all sectors of the body politic: those who had home equity (those who had homes that is), those in the financial industries, and those at the top of the corporate food chain benefited considerably more than those at the bottom, who saw the increased employment opportunities initiated by this expansion translated into low-wage service sector jobs. But at least there were jobs to be had; soft-headed liberals like Paul Krugman could complain about Gini coefficients and income inequality all he wanted, but jobs are jobs (even low-paying ones). This was, of course, before the entire edifice of American financial markets began to crumble. Bear Stearns was only the beginning of the tidal wave the shook Wall Street in 2008. In October of that same year, Lehman Brothers, the fourth-largest investment bank, facing unrelenting pressure in the form of continued losses in their positions on subprime securities, was forced to file for bankruptcy. Unlike Bear Stearns, there was no Jamie Dimon willing to buy its assets with Fed backing. There was also no private bailout coming, and the leadership in Washington spoke of “moral hazard” and detested putting the public taxpayers on the hook for the speculative and
greedy behavior of investment bankers. Lehman’s failure, however, and the subsequent shocks it sent through the financial sector, effectively ended the Republican myth of unfettered free markets and their tendency toward self correction. If there were to be no private bailouts coming, a public bailout had to be arranged. President Bush’s Treasury Sector, Henry “Hank” Paulson went, proverbial hat in hand, to the US Congress and ask them to approve a $700 billion-dollar bailout of the banks to avert the unthinkable situation of Lehman’s competitors—Morgan Stanley, Merrill Lynch and Goldman Sachs—failing as well. Known by the acronym of the TARP act, the Bush administration proved that nobody in Washington really, when push came to shove, believed in the ideology of limiting government “interference” in American economic markets.

The aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008 had political, moral, economic and intellectual implications. On the political front, the Republican Party was doomed in the 2008 elections and the Democrats took control of the White House and Congress, rising on the back of a political star in Obama. In the news media, the public was feed lessons about greed and the moral ineptitude of its financial and political leaders. Economic fear and the insecurity of a ballooning unemployment rate left Americans feeling defenseless: villains appeared in the form of Dick Fuld and Lloyd Blankfein. The economic takeaway of this event seemed clear enough and came when a beleaguered Alan Greenspan came before Congress to explain why the Fed, under his chairmanship, continued to keep interest rates so low, and for such a sustained period of time, in the face of mounting evidence that there was a bubble in mortgage equities about to burst.
When Henry Waxman, Chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, pressed Greenspan on whether his philosophical inclination toward free markets, culled from the intellectual marketplace of Ayn Rand objectivism, had encouraged him to allow Wall Street to take more risk than they should, he conceded that he had “found a flaw” in his ideology.\(^4\) It wasn’t much of a mea culpa, but, at the very least, he acknowledged what Americans already knew: the free market system of capitalism that he and his disciples had touted as a harmonious balance of interests and expectations was, at best, an exaggeration, if not a blatant and gross canard that disregarded the reality of financial market fragility and the need for regulatory oversight.

On the intellectual front, centrist liberals who had previously served the Clinton administration, and had also drunk the Kool-Aid of free-market capitalism, began their retreat back into the arms of regulatory desideratum. Former Clinton appointees such as Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers played it close to the vest; they still, after all, held a considerable stake in the now dubious cause of supporting Wall Street bankers—Rubin as a head of Citigroup and Summers as a member of Obama’s economic team (the latter was later named the President of the hedge fund D.E. Shaw). Others, such as Robert Reich and Brad DeLong, however, candidly admitted that what they previously believed about private-market models of risk assessment in the financial sector and central bankers’ ability to mitigate disaster were wrong. DeLong, the former Deputy Assistant Secretary in Clinton’s Treasury under Summers, and currently and Economics

\(^4\) http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/24/business/economy/24panel.html?_r=0
Professor at UC Berkeley, provided the greatest *mea culpa* of them all. DeLong now writes a regular blog espousing what could only be properly be called Keynesian notions of political economy. In a post dated November 12th 2010, he writes about the intellectual foundations of what he and Summers formerly thought about managing economic markets:

What we did believe? We believed that the Federal Reserve could handle whatever financial crisis the markets could throw at it. We believed that the Federal Reserve had the policy tools, the risk management skills, and the incentives to firewall the real economy from financial dislocations, and to clean up whatever financial messes were left behind. There were solid reasons for these beliefs: they were called 1987, 1991, 1997, 1998, and 2001. In all of those episodes--some of them involving financial losses much greater than those of the initial subprime mortgage crisis--the Federal Reserve had successfully firewalled [sic] the real economy off from financial turmoil.⁵

DeLong refers to these beliefs that he and his superior Summers held as “Greenspanism”: the hubris of the belief that financial crises could be successfully managed and contained through the auspices of the Federal Reserve.

The economic journalist Roger Lowenstein, in a work entitled *When Genius Failed*, which concerns the eruption of the ironically-named hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management in 1999, captures the prevailing ethos of this period perfectly.⁶

Employing the best quantitative minds from the public and private sector, gathering

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together the supposed “geniuses” from the top ranks of places such as M.I.T. and Harvard, the banker John Meriwether and his team developed trading models that were touted as risk-free and able to continually beat market expectations. The fund collapsed, however, when it become overleveraged in Russian currency and dollar swaps and had to be bailed out by the heads of the other investment banks. (Meriwether then, unchastened by his monumental defeat in 1999, went on to found JWM Partners LLC, which reached a cap of $3 billion at the peak of the market in 2007, before failing again in the mortgage-securities meltdown of 2008. Fitzgerald’s famous dictum about ‘second acts’ in America apparently does not apply to the likes of our financial titans.

Meriwether, ever the optimist, has since founded yet another hedge fund, JM Advisors, which has thankfully not raised enough capital to become a viable player in the world of financial markets). Despite this cautionary tale, bankers and hedge fund managers continued to believe, as DeLong points out, that it was possible to “firewall” the “real economy” from “financial dislocations.” In fact, it is not surprising, or completely illogical on the part of central bankers of the Federal Reserve or the heads of the investment banks to view the Long Term debacle as a confirmation of Greenspanism: after all, the “financial dislocation” caused by the collapse of this 3 billion dollar fund was successfully contained by private market bailouts.

The financial bubble in housing equities though was larger and more contagious than any of the other crises that Greenspan’s Fed effectively contained previously—containment here, referring to the fact that earlier financial crises didn’t spread to other equity classes (for the most part), and didn’t harm the non-shareholding public by and
large. After the Dot-com bubble burst in 2000, for instance, employment held strong. Although the fallout of tech stocks was exacerbated by 9/11, the Fed seemed ahead of the curve when they dropped interest rates to 0%, evening a financial ship keeling downward, at a moment when historical circumstances seemed to suggest this was the correct course of action. But history turned out to be a poor indicator of subsequent success, and in the aftermath of 2008 crisis, the Fed simply ran out of corrective arrows to fire at a fledging economy. Suddenly, as if overnight, the dominant economic ideology of free markets, adjusted at the margins by powerful central bankers, to ensure continual economic growth turned out to be a failed paradigm. There was a demand for a new language to discuss the recent happenings in the financial sector and impact it had had on American economy. Actually, as it turned out, one didn’t need a new theory of explain this phenomenon at all, but simply the reanimation of an old theory: Keynesianism.

Formerly an intellectual hermit whose work appeared outside the mainstream of general macroeconomic theory and central banking practice, the so-called experts of modern American finance returned to the works of Hyman Minsky. Minsky, who had written a book on Keynes entitled John Maynard Keynes in 1975 (which will be referred to throughout the course of this project), had seemingly predicated our current crisis. In a work that few people read prior to the 2008 collapse, or considered important because it didn’t participate in the conventional wisdom of the post-1950s rage for financial market expansion—in a similar way to how Keynes’ original General Theory did not share in the conventional wisdom of its time—Minsky was interested in the financial
instability generated by unchecked growth in financial markets. As he explained in a follow-up work to his book on Keynes, the borrowing practices of non-state market agents fell into three distinct categories. According to Minsky, the three different kinds of borrowers are as follows: hedge borrowers, speculative borrowers and Ponzi borrowers. Hedge borrowers are what most people think of when they imagine those who take out loans: individuals or institutions that borrow money and make payments on both the principal and interest of this money over time. In stable economies, mortgage borrowers should be, normatively, hedge borrowers. At a certain point in our no so distant past, all mortgage borrowers were hedge borrowers: taking out bank loans and making regular payments on their homes until they owned their properties.

As financial systems “advance,” however, Minsky noted that a second category of borrowers appear, speculative borrowers, who lack sufficient capital to service (i.e. pay back) the interest and parts of the principle of their loan, but depend instead on the investments they make to “roll-over” so they can cover their debt. Speculative borrowers take on a greater amount of risk than hedge borrowers because if their outstanding investments don’t pan out, they are unable to pay back their debts. These borrowers threaten to disturb the entire macroeconomic system. But, however, there are an even riskier class of borrowers, which Minsky refers to as Ponzi borrowers (named after the dubious Charles Ponzi of the Ponzi scheme), who lack the requisite capital to service their debt, but are also unable to count on investment “roll-over” to make their interest and principle payments. Ponzi borrowers instead depend on the

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appreciation of whatever asset they borrowed against, which would, in theory at least, enable them to pay back what they borrowed if and when this asset rises in price. Ponzi borrowers don’t worry about having the requisite capital—or, indeed, don’t worry about having any incoming capital at all to cover their investment they borrowed to acquire—because they assume the price of that asset will continue to rise indefinitely, and they can simply refinance their original loan when the price of this asset goes up. The asset in question, during America’s latest financial misadventure were homes, which saw steady rises in price that enabled Ponzi borrowers to borrow against future appreciations in their respective assets’ value.

Eventually, however, as Minsky also reasoned, the price of an asset or a certain class of assets, no longer rises in price, and those who had previously depended on this appreciation to finance their debt will be left with no capital or income in order to pay back what they owe, which means that they are forced to declare bankruptcy or go into default on their loan. When enough Ponzi borrowers go into default at the same time, which was what happened in the 2008 crash, and is, in fact, a constitutive feature of asset-backed bubbles, the other borrowers (speculative and hedge) also see sharp declines in the value of their own assets. Even those borrowers on firm financial footing—hedge borrowers with mortgages, for instance—who have an income that allows them to make regular payments on their loans, find themselves in trouble. Within the context of a general decline of a certain asset class, they discover that the value of their particular asset is worth less than the size of their debt. (In our economic parlance, this is what it means “to be underwater” on one’s mortgage.) In this way, Ponzi
borrowers infect the entire system, bringing down more solid borrowers like a stack of dominoes, or to use William Cohan’s chosen metaphor “a house of cards.” Minsky wrote about the instability of U.S. financial systems in this way, and the fragility of Ponzi finance, because he understood the impact that crises in this sector could have the economy as a whole. He never bought into “Greenspanism” and the notion that financial bubbles could be entirely contained, segregated off from the rest of the economy. Minsky offers an evolutionary model of financial “innovation,” in which the false appearance of economic security causes both lenders and borrowers to assume greater and greater levels of financial risk. When he mentions forebodingly that capitalist markets “sow the seeds of their own destruction,” however, he is not suggesting a Marxist teleology of capitalism’s evanescence, but rather an ideology that he inherits from Keynes, in which the relationship between finance and the real economy (stable home owners and speculators on homes or mortgage securities in this case) exist in a tenuous and fragile balance.

His book of Keynes, in this regard, takes to task those who he believes truly didn’t understand that what Keynesian economics was about, which was the delicate interplay between money (the monetary sector of the economy), and what is referred to as the “real economy” where goods and services are exchanged. Minsky’s *John Maynard Keynes* was a work both ahead and behind of its time. Coming in 1973 when the so-called “Keynesian orthodoxies” had ostensibly been accepted by everyone, Minsky challenges the view that the post-Keynesian economists held about their supposed master. “The position taken in his book,” he explains in its Introduction, “is
that the evaluation by Keynes and his contemporaries...of The General Theory as revolutionary is correct; the work does contain the seeds for a deep intellectual revolution in economics and in the economists’ view of society. However, the seeds never reached their full fruition." The main thing, for Minsky, that post-Keynesian economists got wrong about their master’s contribution is two-fold: first, that financial markets, labor markets and commodity markets can be brought into equilibrium with each other by merely finessing various interest rates and employing other macroeconomic tools. For Minsky, Keynes proposed that finance and other sectors of the economy always had the potential for falling into misalignment, with speculative behaviors encouraged in the former sphere consistently threatening the latter. And, second, the neoclassical synthesis by which Keynesian economics was wed to the antiquated models of equilibrium was mistakenly considered by postwar thinkers to be the economy’s natural state.

According to Minsky, the actual Keynesian revolution was “aborted” before it even began, when economists such as Paul Samuelson and Kenneth Arrow, liberals who supposedly agreed with Keynesian principles, attempted to integrate his radical, new ideas within the classical models of economics. When Kenneth Arrow worked to mathematically discover a “competitive equilibrium” (or free market) that would work successfully given certain conditions, he broke, according to this account at least, with the central argument of Keynes’ insistence on market disequilibrium. On another

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9 See particularly, Kenneth Arrow and Gerard Debreu, “Existence of a Competitive Equilibrium for a Competitive Economy” Econometrica (Volume 22, No. 3, 1954). For a good account of Arrow’s ideas and
important level as well, these economists dispensed with important insights of the 
master: both Samuelson and Arrow fall under the rubric of “New Welfare Economists,” 
but what makes them “new” is not their relationship to Keynesian social policy. Unlike 
later neoliberal economists, Kenneth Arrow, for instance, makes room for “policy 
prescriptions” as independent ethical judgments “introduced from the outside.”\textsuperscript{10} Of 
course, the reason that social policy has to be “introduced from the outside” is that it 
cannot be incorporated into his economic theory. New Welfare Economics 
demonstrates its break with Keynes by showing that from the standpoint of market 
efficiency the correct course of social policy can never be known, but with the important 
caveat that a more egalitarian allocation of goods can also provide an “optimal state” 
for economic efficiency, and might therefore be chosen based on this criteria. As Arrow 
explains, “it does not follow that if we are at an allocation which is optimal...we should 
not change to any other.”\textsuperscript{11} In other words, optimal economic efficiency is not a 
sufficient reason, according to Arrow, to neglect social justice.

Nonetheless, Arrow’s separation of the matters of economic equality and the 
creation of more just political system departs in important ways from Keynes’ notion of 
the usefulness of economics as a discipline. For Keynes, raising the issue of aggregate 
demand was a way of discussing how to enact a fairer and more just economic system. 
In his thinking, a more equitable allocation of goods reflected an increasing optimal 
economic system, and vice versa. Economics and political questions were combined in

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item impact in economics, also see George R. Feiwel, \textit{Arrow and the Ascent of Modern Economic Theory} (New York: New York University Press, 1987)
\item Feiwel, 19.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
his project in order to ensure a greater equality in the distribution of a nation’s resources. “The role that Keynes gave the state” explains his biographer Robert Skidelsky, “was essentially that of reducing uncertainty”—which, following Minsky meant reducing particularly financial “uncertainty”—by “creating conditions for people for live ‘wisely, agreeably, and well. This was his answer to the question of ‘what economics was for?’”\(^\text{12}\) “What economics was for,” in other words, at least according to Keynes, was not merely to ensure a harmonious balance between production and consumption, or to discover the correct rate of interest by which money would be borrowed to be either invested or consumed, which would, in turn, spur economic growth. For Keynes, economists had to ensure the people lived “well”; otherwise, what was the point? Ethical considerations of social justice were never for him a matter of secondary importance, but rather his primary concern.

The reintroduction of the concept of equilibrium that figures such as Arrow and Samuelson sought in the 1950s, along with the subordination of the ethics of political economy and how it impacted the lives of individuals effectively “aborted” the Keynesian revolution in Minsky’s mind. Later, during the 1960s, economists out of the University of Chicago school of Economics, which became known as an intellectual hub of advocacy for unfettered free markets, while rejecting government regulation of the economy, sounded the death knell for Keynesianism in the American context. While these postwar economists refined, detached themselves or attacked various aspects of Keynesianism, however, the intellectual ideas that *The General Theory* introduced were

kept vital in one, perhaps unexpected, place in American culture: the literary novel. This project investigates novels published from the period of 1951-1959 and argues that American writers at this time represented the intellectual contribution of Keynes in three fundamental ways: by actively disarticulating the financial operations from the postwar economy for consumer commodities, by highlighting institutional and corporate forms that could shield and offer individuals a way of engaging in market forms, and, by the end of the decade, pursuing more aggressive means of economic inflation—which had, as its end result, the accomplishment of greater consumer satisfaction.

Chapter 1 offers a reading of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and demonstrates that the way he parsed the difference between the financial economies of minstrelsy and the social field of black vernacular culture resonated with the Keynesian notion of viewing monetary and commodity markets in a state disequilibrium or misalignment. In order to dispense with the notion that all acts of black cultural production are essentially transactional and done for economic gain, Ellison produces a sustaining vision of an African American consumerism dedicated to the behaviors of black individuals within a marketplace at the micro level. *Invisible Man* refuses to map the political or economic activities of its characters into the macro realm, thus negating the theories of equilibrium produced by ostensibly post-Keynesian economists such as Paul Samuelson or Kenneth Arrow (introduced above). Understanding Ellison’s politics and economic allegiances within the Keynesian paradigm responses to some of his most combative literary critics,
figures such as Ken Warren, who demand from Ellison’s fiction political commitments of a more expansive and all-encompassing variety.

The second chapter of this work concerns Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, which offers us a narrator in Humbert Humbert who must navigate the landscape of American consumer culture in the 1950s with only his meager savings account to assist him. Nabokov’s iconic novel, I argue, contrasts the consumption habits of Humbert’s underage lover, Lolita, with its narrator’s propensity to pay for her sexual favors, and shows how the entangled relationship between money and commodities, along with, of course, sex, leads him on a path toward dissolution and tragedy. The subtext of the financial economy of Humbert, which appears alongside the consumer economy of Lolita, is the driving force of the novel.

In Chapter 3, I present a reading of Patricia Highsmith’s postwar fictional antihero Tom Ripley, and his employment and representation of the Greenleaf family alongside critical accounts of corporate identity in the 1950s. Contrasting the popular narrative of corporate alienation common to the postwar period with a reading of one of Keynes contemporaries, the economist R.H. Coase, who demonstrated the virtues of economic cooperation for market agents, I argue that Ripley’s institutional affiliation, his commitment to what modern Keynesians might call “managed capitalism” is a constitutive feature of his success. This chapter puts pressure on the notion advanced by popular sociologists at the time such as William Whyte and C. Wright Mills (to name two among many) that corporate institutions, which were an important part of the
American economy after Keynesianism in the 1930s, were problematic systems that undermined the free market agency of individuals.

The fourth chapter of this work, on two William Faulkner novels from the late 1950s, *The Town* (1957) and *The Mansion* (1959) respectively, deviates slightly from the main topic of project as a whole. Faulkner’s commitment to economic growth in his region through the mechanism of monetary inflation places him at odds with the economic and intellectual agenda of Ellison, Nabokov and Highsmith. Nonetheless, monetarism, as I see it in this work at least, even though conventional economic history views it major contender to Keynesian thought, shares common ground with *The General Theory*—both deny the equilibrium theory of markets that prevailed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which experienced a brief return to vogue in the neoliberal imagination of the 1970s and 80s. Faulkner’s novels, nonetheless, situate him on the precipice of a new economic ideology, friendlier to the notion of using the Fed and monetary policy as a mechanism to make adjustments as necessary when temporary disturbances arise in the financial economy; this ideology, as I explained earlier, was an important part of the intellectual apparatus that caused the financial explosion of the early millennium.

This account of postwar American literature intends to be a revisionist intellectual history. (Although perhaps all literary readings desire to be revisionist, insofar as they put distance between themselves and previous readings). One common thread, however, of literary studies of the 1950s has been to point to the social problems that postwar affluence, with its attendant ethos of conformity, wrought on
the middleclass psyche, which has been a theme of both the sociological and political
criticism that appeared during the decade—accounted for most emphatically in the
chapter on Highsmith—as well as more current readings. Much less attention, on the
other hand, has been paid the way prominent economic theories might have sought
solutions to this social fragmentation through the mechanisms of the market. Focusing
on Keynesian theory as crucial to the intellectual history of postwar literary culture
possesses a double virtue: it both assists in the necessary reassessment of the literature
in this period, but also, crucially, points the way forward. Keynes provided a solution not
only to the problems of the past—the economic Depression of the 1930s and its
ostensible resolution in the postwar decades—but also the future, when it now appears
that the radical novelty of his approach to markets and politics might be the only way
save capitalism, as a potential engine of good, from its own debilitating financial
excesses.

13 See: Andrew Hoberek, The Twilight of the Middle Class (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005);
Morris Dickstein, Leopards in the Temple (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Leerom
The Economy of Black Culture: Ralph Ellison, Vernacular Production and the Politics of Consumerism

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In his well-known debate with the literary critic Irving Howe in the early 1960s, Ralph Ellison defended his fiction from the charge that it ignored the reality of black life in America. Howe accused Ellison’s work of abandoning the fight against racial inequality initiated by the black proletariat novels of the 1930s—which had been the zeitgeist of African American literary lions such as Richard Wright—in settling for an “unqualified acceptance of self-liberation.”

Ellison’s quest to free himself from the shackles of depicting black society as depraved, he felt, spoke to the novelist’s disturbing faith in the mainstream liberal optimism that marked the postwar period. The author of *Invisible Man*, in other words, at least according to Howe, failed to produce a strong enough commitment to the cause of racial equality, preferring instead to represent a personal and idiosyncratic vision of black experience in the world, and remaining deeply devoted to culture as the sphere in which black artists, as individuals, would achieve their greatest freedoms. For his part, Ellison did not so much disagree with Howe’s assessment of his work as oriented toward a cultural definition of race, but rather insisted that these cultural matters were, ipso facto, social matters as well. “If there is anything ‘miraculous about the book [*Invisible Man*],’” he writes, quoting directly from the white critic’s 1963 essay, “Black Boys and Native Sons,” in his own piece, “The World and the Jug” (originally published in *The New Leader* in December of 1963), “it is the

result of hard work undertaken in the belief that the work of art is important in itself, that it is social action in itself.”\textsuperscript{15}

The fact that Ellison consistently understood the impact of his work in cultural and aesthetic terms, rather than in political ones, has important implications in locating his fiction within the pantheon of 20\textsuperscript{th}-century African American letters. His avowed commitment to black culture animates Ken Warren’s more recent reading of \textit{Invisible Man} as a document “deeply implicated in redefining race in America away from the realm of party politics...and into the intimacies of personal life.”\textsuperscript{16} Warren’s argument concerning Ellison as a novelist was that \textit{Invisible Man} was one of the first works in African American fiction to view race as chiefly cultural. Writing about the impact of Ellison’s influence on black fiction and politics in the years that followed the publication of his major work—while being diplomatic about not discounting the gains that African American artists have made in the realm of culture—Warren is dubious, to say the least, about the impact of what he calls the “cultural turn” in black politics has had for the majority of African American persons. “If over the last several decades of the twentieth century we have come to take as given the claim that black cultural production is necessarily central to black politics,” he writes, “it seems arguable that what we have seen is the success of, rather than the failure of, a bourgeois hegemonic project centered in an African American politics of culture.”\textsuperscript{17} It is important that Warren’s critique of the “failure” of “black cultural production” comes at the end of an analysis of

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 28-29.
W.E.B. Du Bois concept of the Talented Tenth, which, as an elite cadre of black leaders, would, according to Du Bois, provide political and ethical guidance to the black masses. By placing the *Invisible Man’s* within such as tradition, Warren clearly intends us to question Ellison’s own social and political elitism, which coincides with his commitment to black cultural production. This emphasis on black culture, for Warren, first seen in the early letters of African American intellectuals that reappears in works such as *Invisible Man*, has given rise to a “bourgeois hegemonic project” that has neglected the political and economic opportunities of the black community more broadly.

Taking Warren’s criticism of Ellison means attending to the author’s supposed faith in the ability of black culture to absorb the social problem of racism. Houston Baker, pace Warren, attempts to recuperate the black cultural vision of politics found in Ellison in his account of the Trueblood episode in *Invisible Man*. Rather than seeing Ellison as a cultural elitist who ignores the more pressing concerns of postwar racism, Baker argues that black cultural forms, in particular minstrelsy, function as a way for African American subjects to lay claim to the economic rewards they receive as entertainers. For black cultural producers, he claims, “exchanging words for safety and profit is scarcely an alienating act” as it presumably is for white artists, who must be seen, by Baker’s account, as more sensitive to the economic appropriation of their aesthetic contributions than their black counterparts.\(^{18}\) As Warren points out, however, Baker is hardly the first scholar to find racial retribution in the black folk’s seemingly natural propensity for expression—other racial spokesmen such as W.E.B. DuBois and

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Alain Locke (hardly exemplars of modern racial progressivism) were, according to his account, largely invested in the same project. It is one thing, he argues, to challenge the prevailing norms of Western, white industrial society in its refusal to allow its people’s cultural contributions to become marketable—this merely speaks to the hypocrisy of white Western society; it is quite another to turn black expressivity, as Baker does, into an identity claim. Warren suggests that the second intellectual maneuver begins to uphold a version of black essentialism that comes dangerously close to confirming the biases of black productive capacities also maintained by white racists for much different ends. “To travel from Robert Parker’s Negro, whose ‘metier’ is expression,” he concludes, “to Baker’s Afro-American, whose ontology is ‘expressive representation’ is to move without having moved at all.”19

Yet, the question still remains as to why Ellison is interested in the economic role played in the production of black cultural artifacts. This essay, in particular, will focus on black cultural production in two separate modalities: as a commodity and as an expression of vernacular authenticity—black culture for profit and black culture for itself. Ellison’s nonfiction writings about Louis Armstrong, for instance, present the elder jazz legend as the paragon of manipulating the expectations of his white audience by playing the clown for profit, straddling the line between an economic and aesthetic notion of black cultural achievement. In an essay written in 1962 that considers the life and legacy of late saxophonist Charlie Parker, “On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz,” Ellison chastises the younger generation of bebop musicians for failing to appreciate the

mastery of Armstrong’s musicianship by getting too caught up in the conscious commercialism of his performances. “The thrust toward respectability exhibited by the Negro jazzman of Parker’s generation,” he writes:

…drew much of its immediate fire from their understandable rejection of the traditional entertainer’s role—a heritage from the minstrel tradition—exemplified by such an outstanding creative musician as Louis Armstrong. But when they fastened the epithet of “Uncle Tom” upon Armstrong’s music they confused artistic quality with questions of personal conduct... By rejecting Armstrong they thought to rid themselves of the entertainer’s role... [demanding] a purity of status which by definition is impossible for the performing artist.20

What the musicians of Parker and his generation failed to do, in other words, was to distinguish between Armstrong’s considerable talent as a musician and the economic realities of his life as a performer. They “confused [his] artistic quality” with the buffoonish role he played up for white audiences for monetary compensation.

Ironically enough, moreover, the younger generation of bebop musicians, in their demand for “a purity of status...impossible for the performing artist” became highly-marketable commodities in their own right. In fact, according to Ellison, bebop musicians’ repudiation of the commercial sphere made their inevitable commodification into a veritable parody. Parker’s refusal to enact the ritual of the minstrel clown did not prevent white audiences from treating him as a commodity; if anything, Ellison believes that Parker’s denial of his status as a performing artist accelerated his marketability in outlandish and undesirable ways. “Employing a calculated surliness and rudeness, treating the audience very much as many white merchants in poor Negro

20 Ellison, CE, 259.
neighborhoods treat their customers,” he writes, bebop musicians thought that they could avoid the pitfalls of commercialization. Indeed, “the white audiences were shocked at first” by the aggressively antisocial treatment they received from black entertainers such as Parker, although they “learned quickly to accept such treatment as evidence of [an] ‘artistic’ temperament” and actually began “to expect this rudeness as part of the entertainment.”

Despite the best efforts of these jazzman to maintain their musical integrity above the fray of cheap pandering to white audiences, no musical form became more commodifiable in the postwar decades than black bebop. Michael Szalay’s recent argument that Ellison “faulted [bebop] because it struck him...as the product of upwardly mobile blacks who wished to put distance between themselves...[and] the vernacular musical traditions of the black working classes” in this regard, fails to take into account the fact that the author of *Invisible Man* didn’t ultimately believe it was possible to uphold the distinction between the “vernacular music” that the “black working classes” made for profit and the ‘purer’ bebop forms that musicians such as Parker crafted for presumably artistic purposes.

At the same time that Ellison seems to reject the notion that there exists a non-commodified and non-market version of black culture, he simultaneously wants to uphold a difference between the music that blacks perform for white audiences and what occurs when black (and white) musicians play amongst themselves. In another piece about jazz, published three years before his essay on Parker in 1959, “The Golden

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Age, Time Past,” Ellison writes about the famous midtown jazz club, Minton’s, which attracted some of the best-known talents in the world of jazz music—figures such as Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Christian, Count Basie and even Charlie Parker himself—before they had become household names. Ellison describes Minton’s as a coterie, where musicians could develop their styles in private jam sessions that occurred outside the purview of the public eye. Henry Minton, the club’s founder, made his establishment “hospitable to jam sessions even to the point that customers who were not musicians were crowded out,” thus providing “a retreat, a homogeneous community where a collectivity of common experience could find continuity and meaningful expression.”

By this account, the jam sessions that occurred at Minton’s during jazz’s “golden age” pose a clear alternative to the minstrel performances of musicians such as Louis Armstrong: the former are private affairs, conducted among professional musicians in a space separate from the white marketplace for black cultural commodities. Paying “customers” are “crowded out” of the jam session so that musical virtuosos can hone their craft without needing to attend to the more vulgar commercial considerations that become attached to black cultural production in the marketplace.

In his nonfiction essays about jazz then, Ralph Ellison offers two distinct models for the production of the African American cultural form of jazz. The first, the minstrel marketplace, is a place where African American entertainers sell their cultural products to a paying public, typically represented as white, whereas the second, the space of the jam session, functions as a rarified aesthetic space where professional musicians

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23 Ellison, CE, 246.
compete and collaborate in order to produce an elite and high-culture form of black art. The intellectual architecture that enables Ellison to render these two spaces—the economic where black cultural commodities are exchanged for white financial capital and the social realm of cultural exchange (social in venues such as Minton’s because it doesn’t involve monetary aspects)—as separable is predicated on a Keynesian model of economy that distinguishes between the monetary sphere of exchange and the sphere of production. The sphere of production, in Ellison’s thinking, does not refer to commodities in general, as it does for Keynes, but instead the social opportunities occasioned by blacks engaging in vernacular cultural production. Nonetheless, what is crucial to both Keynes and Ellison’s accounts is that there exists a gap between the monetary realm of the economy, where goods are exchanged for money, and the realm of production. In Keynes’s case, the disjunction between these two realms argues for the need for fiscal policy (increasing investment in production when money is not being spent elsewhere in the economy)\textsuperscript{24}, whereas, for Ellison, it enables him to treat economies as essentially social entities, where black political activities can be more fully engaged (we will see the full implications of this thinking at the end of this essay).

For a critic such as Houston Baker, maintaining separation between the monetary (or what he calls “exchange”) aspects in the market production of blackface minstrelsy, and the rarified aesthetic space where African American vernacular provided

\textsuperscript{24} As it was touched upon in the introduction, prior to the publication of The General Theory in the late 1930s, as the Keynesian acolyte Hyman Minsky explains, “the inherited quantity theory of money held that in the long run, money is a neutral veil” in economic transactions, any disequilibrium between the monetary and productive spheres of the economy was moot. When, however, Keynes defined economic crises and depressions as an inability or unwillingness to spend, which pointed to the difference and interdependence of the monetary and productive markets, fiscal policy came to be seen as a way to augment lackluster spending or demand.
black folks cultural sustenance is critical to his reading of Ellison’s Trueblood episode. Although Baker argues that Ellison sees the pecuniary benefits that accrue for those artists adept at manipulating vernacular masks, he “is also an artist who recognizes that Afro-American folk forms have value in themselves.” But Baker’s version of Ellison fails to acknowledge the most important fact: that black culture has value in itself because the market for the transaction of its commodities and its production are distinct. And, moreover, that the project of integrating these two spheres must proceed through the acknowledgment of their separateness, which hopefully leads to the racial rapprochement of integration (never full integration, but not complete cultural segregation either). In other words, by keeping these two economic realms separate, one might try to achieve what Ellison called, in another later essay, the preservation of our “pluralistic,” and divided “wholeness” and envisioning the market itself as a mechanism for accomplishing this goal.

2.

First, however, understanding the way the minstrel marketplace operates is crucial in order to appreciate how Ellison negotiates the difference between the transactional or monetary aspects of vernacular and the production of black culture. The Trueblood episode in Invisible Man offers a paradigmatic example of white/black relations in the minstrel/monetary realm. The early parts of Ellison’s novel parody the strange logic of the theory of racial uplift championed by Booker T. Washington in the last decade of the

25 Baker, 198. (italics original)
19th century. As a student at the Tuskegee Institute in the early 1930s, Ellison was in a unique position to address the hypocrisies that Washington’s capitulatory style of racial politics fostered. In the second chapter of *Invisible Man*, the narrator attends a school similar to Tuskegee, and finds himself entrusted to care for an important white benefactor, Mr. Norton, who claims to share the enthusiasm of the university’s “great Founder”—a fictionalized Booker T. Washington. As he explains to then feckless narrator, he and the “Founder” were so ideologically aligned that it was impossible to tell whose “vision” the school actually served (39). This common pursuit of rich whites and socially-advanced African Americans in finding an economic and social “place” for blacks in the postbellum South, however, does not present an appealing solution to the problem of racial inequality.

The “vision” that the “Founder” and Mr. Norton share is of blacks enjoined to a life of industrial labor and servitude. When Norton speaks metaphorically about “fruits produced by the land that your great Founder has transformed from barren clay to fertile soil” (45) he indicates the kind of economic regime imagined for former slaves by Booker T. Washington and his white Southern supporters: one in which blacks are “cog[s]” in the machine of white capital. The financial charity that Norton, whom the narrator describes as a “Bostonian, a smoker of cigars, teller of polite Negro stories, shrewd banker, skilled scientist, director, [and] philanthropist,” and the inevitable other

27 Other black critics and racial leaders, including notably W.E.B Du Bois, had long questioned the wisdom of Washington’s commitment to preventing blacks from benefiting from a more robust education in liberal arts, so that they might become more than merely useful laborers in the white marketplace. This, of course, was not the only thing that Washington would compromise with whites on over the course of his ca: he also was willing to exchange the rights of franchise and allow the continuance of segregation in exchange for charitable donations from whites to fund industrial schools for blacks such as the Tuskegee Institute.
white benefactors who fit his description, organizes Negro life in the way that suits his own narrow interests. “[M]y real life’s work,” Mr. Norton explains to the narrator is “not my banking or my researches, but my firsthand organizing of human life” (42). As the historian James Anderson explains in his account of the education of black Southerners in the period from the end the Civil War to the mid-1930s, Tuskegee was a joint effort, conceived by Booker T. Washington in conjunction with another black university, founded by a white Yankee named Samuel Chapman Armstrong, called the Hampton Normal and Agricultural School. While “ex-slaves [in the postbellum South] struggled to develop a social and educational ideology singularly appropriate to their defense of emancipation,” Anderson writes, “[Samuel] Armstrong [and Booker T. Washington] developed a pedagogy and ideology [in their institutions] designed to avoid [racial] confrontations and to maintain…traditional inequalities of wealth and power.”  

28 Black southern universities such as Tuskegee focused on the training of teachers rather than industrial labor force because what it sought was a “corps of teachers with a particular social philosophy relevant to [the] political and economic reconstruction of the South” along lines amenable to white Southerners.  

29 Given this historical context, when Norton claims that his “real life’s work” is “organizing human life,” we can appreciate why Ellison would be dubious about this proposition: the supposed assistance that wealthy white Bostonians offer black populations living the South began in order to control this group’s labor and

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29 Ibid, 77.
employment opportunities. In insisting that he and the narrator’s lives are “intimately” connected, Norton merely seeks to gain the support of the black middleclass to help him in his mission (43). Offering the narrator a list of the possible professions he might chose, Norton closes by telling him “whatever you become, and even if you fail, you are my fate. And you must write to me and tell me the outcome” (44). What the white benefactor seeks is not the narrator’s economic and social subservience—the jobs that he sees him doing are professional, not manual labor—but rather his ideological complicity. He wants to know that they both agree on the “fate” of the black masses as politically and economically subservient to white interests.

The relationship that develops between Norton and the narrator bears a similarity to one between Samuel Armstrong and his African American teaching pupils at Hampton at the end of the nineteenth century: the narrator is being asked to serve the interests of white America as a point of racial contact between whites and the black masses. Norton does not offer to pay the narrator for his services, but instead offers him a position of social status and “intimacy” with prominent members of the white establishment, namely himself. The social bond that the narrator and Norton form in the early pages of the novel is challenged by the appearance of the poor sharecropper Jim Trueblood, however, who enters to disturb the power hierarchy that extends from white benefactor through middleclass African American college students to poorer blacks. Stumbling upon the cabin of Trueblood serves as a stark reminder that the primitive black populations that exist at the periphery of respectable middleclass African

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30 The narrator might become a “good farmer, chef, a preacher, doctor, singer, [or a] mechanic” (43).
American society cannot be entirely contained. Du Boisian-ideals of racial management notwithstanding, nothing can seemingly prevent figures like Trueblood from attracting whites to their outrageous economic markets of minstrelsy.

The sharecropper in *Invisible Man* functions as a particularly egregious example of primitive and minstrel blackness, visiting shame on the nearby community of the university when he fathers a child with his own daughter. Although the narrator wants nothing more than to avoid a meeting between the sharecropper and Norton, he succumbs to his white benefactor’s request that the two meet; his fears are confirmed when Trueblood calmly and unabashedly relates the grotesque story of how he came to have sexual intercourse and father a child with his own daughter. The horror that the sharecropper’s story invokes in Mr. Norton derives, in large part, from the white benefactor’s own perverse and erotic attachment to his daughter, which he subconsciously reveals while showing a photograph of this deceased child to the narrator during their earlier car ride together. In order to compensate for the shame he feels with regard to his own taboo attraction to his dead daughter, at the conclusion of Trueblood’s story, Norton reaches into his “red Moroccan-leather wallet” and extracts a “hundred-dollar banknote,” which he gives the sharecropper so that he may “buy [his] children some toys” (69). The money that the benefactor pays Trueblood for his minstrel performance has, as a transactional medium, a bizarre, and seemingly inverted relationship to the presumptive commodity that Trueblood is selling. The “children” to which Norton refers to when he offers his suggestion that the sharecropper should spend his money on “toys” refers, of course, the infant that Trueblood has incestuously
fathered. In this way, the white benefactor offers the sharecropper an economic incentive to continue his primitive behaviors by paying for a product, more children, which will presumably ensure even greater financial rewards.

The narrator’s role in the episode that occurs between Trueblood and Mr. Norton suggests his compromised position: as the presumed mediator between the black folk and white society, which is a role thrust upon him his white benefactor’s insistence that they share some “intimacy” and collective “fate,” he clearly fails to successfully negotiate their exchange. When the college’s president, Dr. Bledsoe, whom the novel portrays as a hypocritical and blatantly evil manifestation of the ideology of accommodation, kicks the narrator out of school as punishment for his failure to prevent the meeting between Norton and Trueblood, Ellison offers a fairly straightforward indictment of the strategy of using middleclass blacks as go-betweens in finessing the relationship between the black folk and whites. The Trueblood episode, however, in its essence, is a retelling of the lesson that the narrator should have already learned after the novel’s first chapter. Although Dr. Bledsoe comes off as the villain, rather than Mr. Norton, who appears willing to forgive the narrator for allowing him to come into contact with Trueblood, both scenes present a similar story of how economic transactions between blacks selling their cultural goods to whites undermines other more sustaining interactions that might otherwise occur between white and black characters. Blackface minstrelsy is a form through which market transactions between African American cultural producers and the white purchasers of black culture takes place, which reduces the gap between production and exchange. What aggrieves the
narrator about the transaction between Norton and Trueblood is that it annihilates the distance between black vernacular production and the transaction or exchange with white consumers: in order to ensure his dominance over the sharecropper, Norton suggests ways that the money he gives should be spent, which makes him a producer as much as a consumer of black culture.

The first episode in *Invisible Man* also highlights the dilemma that occurs when white men not only exchange money for black cultural goods, but, more importantly, determine the form and kind of black cultural production they desire. At the same time, it demonstrates how economic transactions undermine the ability of African American race leaders, which is the position that the narrator mistakenly believes he inhabits, to improve the social and political lives of his black constituency. Asked to attend a “a gathering of [his] town’s white citizens” as an exemplary member of his race, with the pretense that he will be delivering a speech on black/white relations in the South, the narrator quickly discovers that his utility for this white audience is of a far more degrading sort. Upon arriving at the event, he and his classmates are shuffled off into a room adjacent to the hall where the main activities of the evening will take place. Here, a master of ceremonies explains to the assembled black youths that they will participate in a blindfolded boxing match against their peers for the measly compensation of five dollars. The brutal “battle royal” match that ensues, in which African American subjects are compelled to commit violent acts against each other for the entertainment of their white audiences, presents a poor contrast to the narrator’s other, seemingly more worthy endeavor, of speechmaking. The defining variable between these two very
different species of black/white interaction is that one has a pecuniary element to it—the boxers are paid for their participation—whereas the other does not.\textsuperscript{31}

Throughout the novel, Ellison emphasizes the psychic costs that minstrelsy has on those African American subjects who choose to sell their racially-inscribed cultural commodities to whites. Whether they offer their athletic skills, as the black boxer Tatlock does when he beats the narrator into submission during the “battle royal” match, or what they have to sell are their artistic productions, when the relationship between blacks and whites is figured in economic terms, violence typically ensues. Although, more to point, \textit{Invisible Man} frets not that blacks employ minstrel strategies in order to possess white dollars, but rather that their cultural products are being entirely inscribed within the transactional sphere of white consumer dollars. To reinforce this central point, following the boxing match the bruised and battered fighters are taken to a rug “covered with coins of all dimensions and a few crumpled bills (26). Told by the white MC that they will have the opportunity to compete for this money when he blows his whistle, the narrator admits that, at least initially, he “trembled with excitement” at the thought of laying claim to these riches.

\textsuperscript{31} This scene from \textit{Invisible Man} invokes a similar episode from Richard Wright’s 1945 memoir \textit{Black Boy}, which also involves a boxing match. In his work, Wright relates the story of fighting a black man named Harrison at the prompting of his white coworkers, while employed at an eyeglass factory in the South. Lured by a $5 dollar purse, Wright and Harrison plan to stage a fake boxing match merely for the purpose of collecting the money, which Harrison intends to use “to make a payment on a suit of clothes” (230). Their scheme is foiled, however, when the match begins to escalate on its own accord. After an initial “timid left” thrown by Wright, the men soon find themselves exchanging real punches: “Our plans and promises meant nothing now,” Wright relates, as “we fought four hard rounds” (232). In \textit{Black Boy}, Wright is wholly uninterested in receiving the social recognition of the whites who attend his match; rather his only concern is with laying claim to the $5 prize and avoiding injury. For Ellison’s narrator, on the other hand, he wants to give his speech and reject the cash prize; he is compelled to fight, but never actually takes part by refusing to actually box the other participants (Richard Wright, \textit{Later Works} [New York: Library of America, Inc], 1991).
When the narrator touches the surface of the rug, however, he finds that its surface contains an electric current. Reaching out to touch the coins and the bills, he feels a “hot violent force” tear through his body, “shaking him like a wet rag” (27). These electrical shocks, in turn, throw him and his classmates into a series of painful contortions, which the narrator observes resemble a kind of frenzied dance. Seeing one of his young black peers “lifted into the air” by the charge that emanates from the rug, he watches in horror as the boy comes crashing down to the ground to “literally dance upon his back” (27). This sequence makes the connection between the pecuniary benefits entailed by black performance and violent appetites of white audiences to see African American transforms their bodies into cultural commodities for their consumption. The economies that this episode of the novel disparages are those in which white money can be made to translate immediately into various forms of black entertainment. To even call what occurs when the boys are electrocuted by the rug black cultural production is a bit of a misnomer: vernacular cultural production requires a distortion of the economic channel between money and production, rather than the temporally-reduced, seamless transaction of white finance producing black cultural commodities in such a violent manner.

Returning to the Trueblood episode, the narrator makes an interesting admission about his particular relationship to the sharecropper, which underscores how the market of white consumers, desiring a certain kind of black cultural production, works to the detriment of African American producers, aided and abetted by professional blacks. This reading has important implications for how we understand the narrator’s
role in the “battle royal” sequence, and, in particular, the opportunity he is offered, following the fight to engage, in a more sociable setting, with the white audience. When it comes to the sharecropper, working within the paradigm constructed by Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe and the Great Founder, the narrator, as a middleclass black person (implicitly a member of the Talented Tenth of African Americans) with professional ambitions, must to manage the relationship between whites and the poor black folk. In such a role, he includes himself as among those university-educated black persons disgusted and horrified by the primitive ways and actions of Trueblood. The narrator remembers the sharecropper coming to his school:

when a special white guest visited the school he [Trueblood] was brought up along with members of a country quartet to sing what the officials called “their primitive spirituals”...We were embarrassed by the earthly harmonies they sang, but since the visitors were awed we dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet. That had all passed now with his disgrace [his incest], and what on the part of the school officials has been an attitude of contempt blunted by tolerance, had now become a contempt sharpened by hate. I didn’t understand in those pre-invisible days that their hate, and mine too, was charged with fear. How all of us at the hated the black-belt people, the “peasants” during those days. We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down (47).

As this passage reveals, at one point in time, Trueblood offered a useful service to the college: he played the part of the black primitive, singing Negro spirituals to the white patrons who occasionally visited the school. It can be assumed that these unnamed whites share predilections similar to Mr. Norton when it comes to their propensity for consuming black culture, and that they offer the college financial remuneration, in the
form of charity most likely, to be entertained by the sharecropper’s minstrel show. Once Trueblood commits his act of adultery, however, he becomes a *persona non grata* as far as the school is concerned, and must turn directly to whites in order to ensure his financial subsistence.

As he explains to the narrator and Mr. Norton, after he has sex with his daughter, “the niggers [sic] up at the school come down to chase me off and that made me mad. I went to see the white folks then and they gave me help….The niggers up at the school don’t like me, but the white folks treat me fine” (67-68). While it is important to note that the breakdown of the arrangement between Trueblood and the black college ends up benefiting him financially, what is crucial to see is that both regimes—the school receiving charitable donations from Trueblood’s singing of Negro spirituals and the sharecropper accessing white dollars directly by committing incest—depend on the activation of an economy in which white dollars are exchanged for black performance. Whether the sharecropper performs for Mr. Norton outside his cabin, or whether he performs in front of a white audience at the request of the university itself, he exhibits only very loose control and agency over the form of the minstrel mask that offers him access to the financial benefits that are attached to the white consumption of black culture. Previously used as a pawn in the racially-performative rituals of the university, he distances himself from exploitation of this institution only to find his cultural primitiveness exploited again by Norton’s wealth.

There is, however, one other instance of exchange that occurs between whites and blacks in the early part of the novel that needs to be addressed: at the conclusion of
the battle royal episode, the narrator receives a social commendation, slightly different from the benefit he gains as a student of college, unwittingly exploiting Trueblood for his minstrel performance. The narrator is finally allowed to address the white audience and gives a hypocritical speech on race relations that places the onus for black oppression on their own lack of responsibility (31). Afterwards, the MC presents the narrator with a gift, “in the form of [a] first-class article from Shad Whitmore’s shop” (32). The article that he receives is a “gleaming calfskin brief case,” which is intended to confer honor and respectability on its receiver. However, the adjective used to describe this gift, “gleaming,” offers an important clue as to its meaning and significance. The “gleaming” quality of this consumer good recalls the coins on the money rug in the previous scene: for all intents and purposes it is just another form of financial compensation, similar to the bill the Trueblood receives or the charitable donations that black university collects from white donors impressed by the sharecropper’s minstrel performances.

3.

Given the degradations and damage that blacks experience in their interaction with whites in the marketplace for their cultural commodities, one political solution that Ellison’s novel explores is absenting oneself from this market entirely. Appearing as bookends to the narrative episodes of Invisible Man are a prologue and epilogue, which finds Ellison’s narrator living in a “border area” of Harlem “in a section of [a] basement” to an apartment building “rented strictly to whites” (5-6). The narrator reports filling his basement apartment with lights—1,369 lights to be exact (a number whose significance
is ambiguous)—of an “older, more-expensive-to-operate...filament type” of bulb (7).

This commitment to excessive luminescence has a political and economic purpose: the narrator explains that he is “carrying on a fight with Monopolated Light and Power” by draining their power, seeking retribution for the “[s]everal years” he spent going through the “routine process of buying [their] service and paying their outrageous rates” (5). Invisibility, the narrator continues, has its “advantages”—one being the ability to financially injure companies that “routine[ly]” harm black customers by charging them above market rates. Another similar benefit of invisibility, which is indicated by the fact that the narrator lives in building “rented strictly to whites,” is that it provides him access to economies that would otherwise exclude him. In choosing to become a “phantom,” he no longer worries about racial redlining laws that would prevent him from living in certain neighborhoods. In short, he becomes free to choose to live wherever he pleases.

The economic advantages that fall to the narrator when he decides on invisibility are a direct result of his abandoning markets that constrain black participation and activity. As the conservative economist Gary Becker argues, racist attitudes, which can be quantified by the amount of money an individual is willing to pay to disassociate with people of another race, depends on some modicum of social contact between the two groups. “Since people discriminate little against those with whom they have only indirect ‘contact’ in a marketplace,” he writes, “some direct contact must be necessary
for the development of a desire to discriminate." The fantasy at the beginning and end of Ellison’s novel is that invisibly will functions as a way of overcoming market

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32 Gary Becker, *The Economics of Discrimination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971; originally published in 1957), 14. Becker’s 1957 work of neoclassical economy, *The Economics of Discrimination*, sought to bind black labor to white capital in hortatory account of the ability of free markets of overcome the problem of racial discrimination. Becker, a disciple of the Chicago School of Economics and prominent intellect in the backlash that sought to unseat Keynesian theory as postwar America’s dominant economic paradigm, argued that discrimination against blacks occurred, in part, because of the numerical disparity between white and black laborers and because African American laborers lacked sufficient capital investment potential, and were thus, dependent on white capital for survival. For this reason, although “[m]inority groups are often tempted to ‘retaliate’ against discrimination from others by returning discrimination,” Becker thought that such retaliation attempts were a “mistake.” White “majorities,” he explained, “have a more balanced distribution of labor and capital” than blacks do, and “although [Negroes] are hurt by [white] discrimination [to put the issue all too mildly],” he maintained that the former would be “hurt even more by its own discrimination.” His thesis, in a more succinct form, was that “[w]hite labor and Negro capital gain from discrimination, and white capital and Negro labor lose from it.” The political takeaway from *The Economics of Discrimination* was that blacks in the 1950s would be much better off throwing in their lot with white employers and investors than with either black capitalists or white labor unions.

Becker’s entire argument, however, that blacks must rely on white capital or else worsen their economic lot depends on the fact that investment in labor occurs according to conditions of general equilibrium. That is, the investment decisions of white capital may be impacted by preferences for hiring a certain race, but the net wage rate, irrespective of the racial composition of said workers, always comes down to an “endeavor to maximize money income.” The way Becker works through the ostensibly disjunctive difference between the behavioral preferences for hiring, working with, or living alongside a certain race and the rational economic decisions to maximize utility, which would seemingly inevitably undermine many racist attitudes, is tricky and requires further elaboration. In his discussion of racially-motivated hiring preferences, he writes that “conventional theory usually ‘assumes’ that all employers” want to increase their income, but acknowledges that such an ‘assumption’ “has been continuously criticized by those who argue that some employers want power, an easy life, and other forms of non-money income. The introduction of DC’s [which is Becker’s economic measure for racial preferences, called a *discrimination coefficient*] generalizes conventional theory; it is no longer assumed that all potential employers want to maximize money income.” With this point, he admits that rational economic motivations cannot entirely account for a person’s decisions. But, Becker adds, “[n]evertheless, under certain conditions the equilibrium MDC [which stands for the average of all discrimination coefficients of existing firms in a given industry] would equal zero, and, consequently, all surviving employers would be maximizing money income.” In other words, under conditions of perfect market competition, without the inefficiencies inherent to institutions such as labor unions or monopolies, employers would make decisions based strictly on “maximizing [their] money income,” which would, thus, erase the impact of mistaken economic choices made regarding racial preferences.

Becker’s faith that economic rationalism and competitive markets, which seek a natural equilibrium between investment and labor, or, harmonize the relationship between financial investments, labor and output, is the premise of his book from the very beginning. “While much of the discussion [regarding segregation] has concentrated on discrimination in such non-market activities as church and school attendance and voting,” he writes, “there has also been considerable discussion of discrimination in the market place—in employment, housing, transportation, etc. Such discrimination has assumed importance not only because of its direct economic consequences but also because of the belief that by eliminating market discrimination one could eliminate much of the discrimination in non-market areas.”
discrimination by eliminating the social contact between whites and blacks. In fact, one might say that the narrator’s invisibility prevents markets from having any relevancy, and that even the retribution he seeks against Monopolated Light and Power, which he initially considers an “act of sabotage” (7), doesn’t matter according to any conventional economic calculus. “Since you never recognize me,” the narrator explains, “even when in closest contact with me, and since, no doubt, you’ll hardly believe that I exist, it won’t matter if you know that I tapped a power line leading into the building and ran it into my hole in the ground” (13). Denying the significance of even this act of resistance to white capital and power suggests that the narrator has come to reside in a sphere so far outside economic and social forms that market sabotage is no longer even necessary.

The question then, of course, becomes: what does the narrator’s invisibility achieve? What does his rejection of economic contact with whites solve? Undoubtedly, it enables the narrator to avoid the negative costs associated with the minstrel market, but, as it has already been suggested, for an avowed integrationist like Ellison, does his avoidance ultimately help or harm the achievement of greater racial harmony? The narrator’s escape does have one clear advantage: it allows him to reconnect to his vernacular cultural heritage in a way that avoids the baggage of minstrel market forms. While residing underground, he discovers the ability to “play the invisible music of [his] isolation” (13). While the narrator lacks direct contact with the larger and whiter

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In essence, therefore, what *The Economics of Discrimination* argues is that by eliminating racial discrimination in the marketplace, which, as we have already seen, involves making markets more competitive by removing obstacles that prevent their approaching equilibrium, instances of racism of a more purely social variety—in politics, education or religions for example—can be overcome. Expressing such a belief in the power of markets, however, runs entirely counter to the approach that Keynes suggests in his *General Theory*
world—which comes across in an episode that begins the prologue when he encounters a “a tall blond man” on the street, who he murders before realizing that the man is not even aware of his existence—he is not entirely alone in his basement. Instead of other people, he possesses a phonograph and a record of Louis Armstrong “playing and singing ‘What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue’”; and on one night, he recalls, “I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak” (8-9). These “other voices” begin as “line[s]” in Armstrong’s music, but are soon transformed into the voices of a black preacher addressing his congregation in the antebellum South. Aided by the effects of marijuana and sloe gin, the narrator enters a time warp to hear the vernacular voices of his racial kinfolk, expressed in snippets and fragments of dialogue that are strung together as loosely as the musical lines of Armstrong’s song.

Cloistered in an underground bunker, the narrator, Louis Armstrong and the black voices that appear from “inside” his musical notes comprise a historical record of African American cultural achievement that falls outside the mainstream culture of the United States. The narrator’s underground hovel resembles, in this sense, Minton’s jazz club, which also represented a place and time that was never canonized in the annals of American history. Returning to his essay “The Golden Age, Time Past,” Ellison reflects that Minton’s appeared “[d]uring a time when”:

sociologists were concerned with the riots, unemployment and industrial tensions of the time the historians with the on sweep of war and the critics and most serious students of culture found this area of
our national life of little interest. So it was left to those who came to Minton’s out of the needs of feeling, and when the moment passed no one retained more than a fragment of its happening.  

What happened at Minton’s, of course, was that the direction of American music changed irrevocably as a new idiom of jazz was born. Much like the vernacular voices that the narrator hears in his basement escape, however, this news was not well publicized at the time, although a “legend” later developed around it. Trying to recapture the origins of black music, Ellison suggests, whether in the idioms and dialects of former black slaves or in recalling what occurred during Minton’s famous jam sessions, involves a significant degree of fabrication. “They retell,” Ellison writes (and who they are, we never know), “the stories as they have been told and written, glamorized, inflated, made neat and smooth, with all incomprehensible details vanished along with most of the wonder,” but the true story of how black culture advanced will never be entirely be made entirely available for public consumption, and will never be completely known.  

Yet, for all the private mystery attached to African American art in Invisible Man and Ellison’s essays, there is the persistent problem that, despite the exchange that occurs on a more intimate and exclusive plane between the producers of black cultural, these jazz musicians at Minton’s, what counts as social activity in the promotion of racial equality under this paradigm seems severely limited. As much as the narrator enjoys his descent into the musical bars of Armstrong’s jazz and the accompanying access they

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33 Ellison, CE, 239
34 Ibid.
offer him into black vernacular culture, this moment is followed by a hasty ascent “from the underworld” back into the social and economic reality of black life, where the music “demands” a certain commitment to “action” (12). The coupling of Armstrong’s music with a method of conceiving social “action,” as the last section of this essay will argue, requires a different way of thinking about the politics of racial cultural production and the market forms in which they are embedded. Relying on the gap the Keynesian theory articulated between financial operations and exchange, on the one hand, and the production of goods, and the subsequent commitment to ensuring high levels of consumption, on the other, Ellison constructs a market in which the evanescence of money denotes the appearance of a new kind of racial and political social body.

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In order to dispense with white financial capital and its habit of fixing the definition of black cultural forms and their social content, however, Ellison’s narrator must first literally destroy a bank. Midway through Invisible Man, at the point in the story when the narrator decides to join the Brotherhood (a Communist organization with offices in Harlem), he awakens one morning to the sound of his upstairs neighbor banging a shoe on a pipe that connects their two apartments—the narrator is living, for a time, with a black matriarch named Mary, who takes him in following an accident that he suffers while an employee at a corporation called Liberty Paints. Flying into a rage at being awoken by such a noisy and rude reveille, the narrator casts his gaze around his bedroom in search of an object with which to “strike back” against his inconsiderate neighbor. While looking for an appropriate object, his eyes fall on “something that he
had “never noticed before,” surreptitiously tucked away behind his bedroom door: it is a “cast-iron figure of very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthe\ldots*[with a] single black hand held palm up before his chest” (319). The minstrel artifact doubles as a piggy bank, and the hand, as the narrator observes upon closer examination, is attached to a “lever,” which, when pressed, “will raise [the figure’s] arm and flip a coin into its grinning mouth” (Ibid). This object, in a hyperbolic way represents the intimate association between degrading examples of minstrel culture and monetary capital.

Unsurprisingly, as an individual sensitive to such grotesque caricatures of blacks, the narrator goes into a rage when he discovers this object hidden behind the door of his bedroom. Picking up the minstrel artifact, he smashes it against the pipe, shouting at the other tenants in the apartment “Act civilized!” as the “kinky iron head” of the bank “crumble[s]” and breaks in his hand (320). When the top of the piggy bank breaks, a cascade of coins fly “over the room like crickets, ringing, rattling against the floor, rolling.” “I stopped them dead,” the narrator reports (Ibid). This episode is significant because it demonstrates another of the narrator’s ill-fated attempts to control his people by changing what he refers to as their “cottonpatch ways.” The minstrel object that he destroys stands in for his uncivilized neighbors who do unbecoming things such as bang their shoes against pipes and shriek in order to get what they want (in this case, their protest is directed towards the building’s superintendent for his turning off the heat). Second, as it was already mentioned, this sequence reestabishes, in an especially explicit way, the relationship between monetary capital and behavior that could be described either as “cottonpatch ways” or minstrel performance. The narrator’s desire
to break the bank, in this sense, serves as a way for him to undermine the connection between minstrelsy, as the dominant form of black behavior, and money.

Although the narrator’s subsequent treatment of Mary is particularly interesting in light of his desire to disarticulate money from minstrel behaviors. After having just chastised his neighbors for their actions, he confronts a black woman who similarly possesses “cottonpatch ways.” Mary plays the figure of the black Mammy: a desexualized and soothing African American female who nurses the narrator back to health and treats him like her own son. Feeling guilty that he will soon be leaving her to join the Brotherhood, the narrator makes the dubious gesture of offering his landlady a “hundred-dollar bill” as compensation for her kindness. The moment inevitably recalls the exchange between Trueblood and Mr. Norton, but with the narrator thrust uncomfortably into the role of the white benefactor. Much like the sharecropper’s reaction to Norton’s pecuniary beneficence, Mary displays a disbelieving hesitancy when offered this money. As she explains to the narrator, “that’s a hundred-dollar bill”: “I take that an’ try to change it and white folks’ll want to know my whole life’s history.’ She snorted. ‘They want to know where I was born, where I work, and where I been for the last six months, and when I tell’em they still gonna think I stole it. Ain’t you got nothing smaller?’ (325). The narrator does not, unfortunately, have any smaller bills to give her, but Mary’s dilemma speaks to yet another problem with black participation in the postwar economy. Even African Americans who had the money to spend in the
1940s and 1950s—given that incomes rose for all groups during this period—were consistently, due to Jim Crow laws that limited their access to certain marketplaces, denied the right to spend their money.

As Lizabeth Cohen’s recent account of postwar consumer culture, *A Consumers’ Republic*, argues, the Civil Rights Movement, which picked up momentum in the years after the publication of Ellison’s novel, drew much of their political power from the notion of “democratizing the marketplace.” “Civil rights activists,” she writes, throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, “regularly were mounting boycotts and other consumer actions...to achieve the end goal of desegregation.” The rhetoric of a consumer rights, which meant the ability and freedom to shop wherever one should choose to shop, was particularly effective in African Americans battle for political equality, Cohen claims, because it spoke directly to the heart of America’s commitment

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35 While it is important to acknowledge that the distribution of spoils between the races throughout the postwar period never approached anything near parity, at the same time, the real income of African American wage earners rose in the decade from 1939, when the Great Depression was still going strong, until 1949 by 320%, which is a monumental figure by any standard (e.g. when adjusted for inflation, the buying power of African Americans still more than doubled over this timeframe; it was also greater than the relative percentage increase in whites salaries during the same period, which grew by 240% respectively). On average, black incomes were still only 59% of whites in 1949, although this too, represented an increase from only 44% in 1939. Many factors contributed to the surge in wealth among African Americans throughout the 1940s: northward migration to New York and Midwestern cities such as Detroit offered blacks better employment opportunities than they had previously enjoyed, while legislative actions like the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC)—which was initially a wartime measure instituted by Franklin Roosevelt that required companies receiving government contracts not to discriminate based on race or religion, and was continued in peacetime by Truman—also benefited the economic wellbeing of African Americans in some limited capacity. The later racial activism of the Civil Rights era, which focused on gaining equal access to public accommodations—specifically outlined in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as including places such as hotels, motels, restaurants and theaters—and housing, can only be understood in the context of increasing financial fortunes of blacks in the postwar period. With the emergence of a black middle class, the promise of America’s mass market, which seemed to entitle all citizens to the goods that the economy produced, was made to confront the institution of Jim Crow, which denied African Americans the right to participate as consumers in the national economy.


37 Ibid, 187.
to consumer capitalism as part of the ideological machinery that would defeat Soviet Communism. Mary’s inability to belong to this consumers’ republic, if you will, is made clear by her fear that whites will doubt the validity of how she came to possess the money that the narrator gives. The “hundred-dollar bill” in question, therefore, is doubly doomed as an effective way for increasing African American equality: first, its presence suggests that the narrator has not broken the cycle of bad minstrel economies, where whites pay blacks for certain performances, but rather extended and reinforced its harmfulness; he is to Mary, what Norton was to Trueblood. Second, Mary’s potential inability to spend the money because whites have denied blacks the right to participate in marketplaces makes it an ineffective medium for pursuing racial progress. And finally, if this was not enough, the money that the narrator gives Mary, which he receives from the Brotherhood to give speeches that deliver Communist-themed messages, is tainted by this organization’s lack of real care for the black community.

Considering this last point, it is important to note that, at first, the narrator is under the thrall of this group who claims to possess the ability to solve racial problems by proxy: the Brotherhood’s argument, which should be familiar enough, is typical Marxist orthodoxy, and asserts that the goal of ending labor exploitation under the structures of capitalism will also serve to eliminate racist thinking. Initially blinkered into accepting this interpretation, the narrator becomes, over the course of the novel, increasingly less committed to the ideological notions espoused by the Brotherhood, which has the added effect of making him considerably less combative toward capitalist markets. While he has learned tough lessons on how markets can hurt blacks who sell
their cultural commodities to whites, the narrator’s distancing himself from the program of the Brotherhood affords him the opportunity to rethink the social politics involved in consumerism. In effect, Ellison’s novel begins to envision consumption not in terms of Marxist economy, predicated on the notion that consumer goods, as examples of fetishism, are objects that remake the social field into alienated market relations, but rather to see consumerism as a mechanism for increasing social opportunities in a post-monetary, and thus (in some sense) post-capitalist marketplace.

What precipitates this change in the narrator’s outlook is when Tod Clifton, a former member of the Brotherhood, abandons the organization. The narrator later discovers his former comrade selling paper “Sambo” dolls on a Harlem street corner—a crucial scene upon which the latter parts of the novel, in some important way, pivot. For Ken Warren, these “puppets” sold by Tod Clifton “are offensive, but their meaning is clear: Clifton, the invisible man, and all of Harlem are being made to dance to the tune of a variety of manipulators.”38 The most damaging manipulators, by this point in the novel anyway, is the organization of the Brotherhood itself, as previously noted. When the narrator commences his search for Tod Clifton, who disappears one day from party headquarters, he is shocked to find how disenchanted his community, the neighborhood of Harlem, has become. While he has been reading Communist literature and studying Marx with the private tutor that the Brotherhood has provided him, his brethren have been quietly seething under the pain of racism. “If I hadn’t been so careful not to offend the committee,” he reflects sourly, “I would have kept in closer

38 Warren, 42.
contact with Clifton and the whole Harlem membership. Now it was as though I had been awakened from a deep sleep” (422). The narrator feels badly used by the Brotherhood, and when he finds Clifton selling Sambo dolls on the street corner, it seems reasonable to think that these racist figures are proxies for him, paralleling the way that the Brotherhood keeps him scurrying around from committee meeting to committee meeting—just another puppet on a string.

Sianne Ngai’s reading of this scene, which points out the ways that the power dynamic between the puppeteer (Tod Clifton) and the puppet (the supposedly inanimate doll) comes to be curiously inverted at times, makes a point similar to Warren’s. She argues that the voice that commands the doll be twisted into certain postures and poses does not issue from the mouth of Clifton, but rather originates from a disembodied other; for her, this demonstrates, in turn, “the unexpected mechanization of the human animator by the inhuman object he animates.” 39 Both Ngai and Warren underscore the fact that, as the narrator later puts it, Clifton “was only the salesman [and] not the inventor of the dolls” (448). This admission enables the narrator to leave aside the question of Clifton’s “act of betrayal” (Ibid) in order to focus instead on giving him a proper memorial. After his former comrade is murdered by a white police officer, the narrator decides that he will use “Clifton’s crumpled body” as a “politically effective weapon” in the fight for racial equality, much in the same way that Clifton brought the doll’s crumpled body to life for profit. At first glance, this would appear to be a problematic solution: how does the narrator justify using his former

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friend’s life for these political ends? And, more to the point still, how does his figurative employment of Clifton’s martyred “crumpled body” avoid being appropriated within the same marketplace that sold the “offensive” minstrel dolls?

The narrator, for his part, appears quite conscious of the fact that the posthumous Tod Clifton functions as commodified trope of racial injustice more broadly, rather than as a specific and particular person whose life and death deserves to be honored. As he tells the crowd of mourners assembled in Harlem for his funeral, Clifton’s death “was perfectly natural. The blood ran like blood in a comic-book killing, on a comic-book street in a comic-book town on a comic-book day in a comic-book world” (457-458). The narrator’s invocation of his mass media form to describe the murder to his peer satirizes how normal, or “natural,” violence against black men in New York has become; it also, however, serves as mechanism that allows the crowd to understand Clifton’s death in a familiar context. Immediately following his sly assertion that his comrade’s murder was a “comic-book killing,” he genuflects by saying that “Tod Clifton’s one with the ages,” turning him into a superhero who may very well belong in the pages of a comic book after all. Yet, for all that, the narrator insists that Tod Clifton was also a man, and not merely a figure for promoting a certain political agenda. Several times through his speech, the narrator states that “his name was Clifton,” lest the assembled audience forget that he was a particular person with particular thoughts and emotions.

Ken Warren’s chief complaint with *Invisible Man*, which appears mainly in the chapter of his book devoted to Tod Clifton’s funeral, is it insists on the personal lives of
black folk as distinct and idiosyncratic, while failing to achieve a larger ideological coherence. The passages quoted above from the narrator’s speech at his fallen comrade’s memorial seem, at first glance at least, to make Warren’s point. “In Ellison’s novel,” he writes, “although the murder of Tod Clifton remains prominent during the funeral, the march and gathering are not so much against something as they are for something. No petitions against police brutality are circulated. No demands are made for the resignation of city officials.” Indeed, Warren is right: none of these more conventional political tactics are applied when the narrator and his Harlem brethren come together to honor the life of Tod Clifton. But, what Warren misses is how the market context of this scene, the narrator’s invocation of Clifton as a “comic-book” hero for the ages, while denying the possibility of aggregating all the various desires and goals of the participants of the event into one tidy political slogan or formula, creates the possibility for a robust social and political camaraderie.

Immediately upon leaving the memorial, Ellison’s narrator stumbles into an open-air marketplace Harlem. Standing among the shoppers who “boiled, sweated [and] heaved” as they make their weekly grocery purchases, and listening to the “watermelon huckster…crying his wares with hoarse appeals to nostalgia (460), the narrator feels an intense connection to the members of his political constituency and the people of his racial tribe. This experience of collective intimacy in the context of consumption has nothing to do with the politics of consumerism that Liz Cohen advances when she discusses the way that Civil Rights leaders used shoppers’ boycotts to “put pressure on

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40 Warren, 48.
the racial status quo at its weakest link, white economic dependence on black consumers." This episode, in short, has nothing whatsoever to do with money or minstrelsy or the power of white capital, and everything to do with the resurrection of the racial social body through consumerism. What makes this instance of consumption interesting, moreover, is that (pace Kenneth Warren) it refuses to make blanket assumptions about the needs of blacks as a collective entity. As the narrator explains, at first he believes “there was still too much to be done; plans had to be made; the crowd’s emotions organized” (Ibid). But as he meanders through the market, he realizes that there is nothing “to be done.” When it comes to the market, nothing actually should be done beyond what is already being done: black shoppers are shopping, and by shopping they are advancing the goals of an economic and racial unity.

Keynes most radical idea, which was an outgrowth of his insight that the market for the production of commodities and that of financial capital often became misaligned, was his commitment to consumer demand as the true and most important metric for measuring economic growth. Importantly, Keynes realized that there was no consistent way to integrate the various markets or indices of things such as consumption, production or money to arrive at some notion of equilibrium—a situation in which the economy was static in terms of producers always finding buyers and investment capital, and buyers always finding commodities to purchase. The economist Paul Samuelson, who was one of the most important figures in popularizing Keynes for American audiences, as well as trying to square Keynesian insights with classical

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41 Cohen, 187.
economic models that predated *The General Theory*, introduced a theory in the 1930s, and then again revisited it in the 1950s, called “Revealed Preference Theory.”42 Samuelson’s theory was, in large part, a response to the model of consumer behavior based on the concept of marginal utility theory, which had understood the economic preferences of consumers in terms of the diminishing value of returns that consuming additional quantities of the same good had on their propensity to consume more of the same. Samuelson argued that micro-economists needed to take into account not only what consumers should purchase according to the theory of diminishing marginal utility, but what they actually purchased and what this “revealed” about their preferences. In short, what Samuelson wanted was to use empirical data of consumer purchases at the micro-level and aggregate his findings to make prescriptive policy recommendations at the macro-level. Neoclassical economic theory such as this, which some more liberal detractors called “bastard Keynesianism” was committed to creating ever larger and more coherent models of the economy.

By viewing his racial brethren as shoppers, and subsequently refusing to make their consumer activities indicative of some larger collective trend or formula, Ellison commits himself not to an apolitical agenda of racial cultural politics as Warren claims, but rather to a Keynesian vision of market uncertainty in consumer preferences that requires one to avoid making over-generalizations when it comes to the desires and demands of the postwar black populace. Despite Warren’s desire that Ellison stay in the past, with the programmatic political solutions of traditional leftist thought, the author

of *Invisible Man* shows that he is considerably more interested in moving progressively forward along the political and economic lines suggested by the important insights of *The General Theory* regarding the lack of verifiable information with micro-consumer behaviors.
Published several years after Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, despite the fact that its author had begun writing what would become his most famous literary work in the late 1940s, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) depicts a scene similar to one that occurs toward the end of Ellison’s novel.Momentarily caught up in the carnivalesque atmosphere of a racial riot in Harlem at the conclusion of *Invisible Man*, the narrator attaches himself to a roving band of looters who break the windows of liquor stores and clothing boutiques in order to steal the contents within. Although he is initially exhilarated by the prospect of striking back against the white economic establishment in Harlem and participating in this riot, the events take a turn for the worst when the narrator’s companions decide to set fire to an apartment rented primarily to African American tenants. Unable to confront the logic of their setting fire to black housing projects, the narrator escapes temporarily, but is soon made to confront another terrible sight on a nearby side street: a “body, hung, white, naked and horribly feminine from a lamppost.” Conjuring images of lynching, Ellison’s narrator discovers that the figure hanging from the lamppost is not a human body after all, but rather a “[h]airless, bald and steriley feminine...mannequin” that some pranksters have tied to the lamppost as a macabre joke.” “Expecting the relief of laughter,” the narrator finds

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43 Given the pornographic nature of its content, the first version of Nabokov’s *Lolita* appeared two years after he had completed it 1953. Following rejections from major U.S. publishers such as Doubleday, Simon & Schuster and Farrar Straus, Olympia Press eventually released the fiction in a paperback form “swarming with typographical errors” (Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991], p. 292.  
44 Ellison, *IM*, 556.
instead that he is “more devastated by the humor than the horror” of the dummy hanging from the lamppost. In this scene, Ellison subtly advises caution on how African American persons should seek economic and political redress, particularly when the issue involves their participation, or, in this case, their destruction of the American consumer marketplace. It may be better, Invisible Man finally suggests, for blacks to avoid bringing radically destructive activity to bear on economic markets. For, as Ellison shows throughout the course of his novel, markets can be both sustaining and alienating, offering moments of redemption and chilling violence for black persons, depending, as the first chapter argued, on the context of their involvement.

In an episode that also appears near the end of Lolita, Humbert Humbert, the nom de plume of Nabokov’s fictional narrator, confronts a similar scene of violence against mannequins. Stumbling through a sleepy American western town called Wace, he observes a window display on Main Street where a “dapper young fellow [is] vacuum cleaning a carpet of sorts upon which stood two figures that looked as if some blast had just worked havoc with them.” Upon closer inspection, Nabokov’s narrator sees that the parts of the two figures in question are female mannequins: one an adult woman, and the other a “girl-child.” Humbert Humbert becomes visibly distraught by the macabre violence visited on these feminine forms. “[O]n the floor,” he recounts, “at the feet of these damsels, where the man crawled about laboriously with his cleaner, there

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45 Ellison, IM, Ibid.
lay a cluster of three slender arms, and a blonde wig. Two of the arms happened to be
twisted and this seemed to suggest a clasping gesture of horror and supplication” (226).

Humbert’s thoughts are colored at this point in novel by the unspoken
acknowledgement that he will soon lose his teenage lover, Dolores “Lolita” Haze, to a
screenwriter named Clare Quilty, who shares the narrator’s sexual taste in underage
women. This episode in Wace is the climax of Humbert and Lolita’s cross-country
journey, with Quilty secretly following their trail and ready to take the narrator’s
teenage girlfriend away from him for his own devious and impure purposes. The
“horror” that Humbert experiences looking through the display window in Wace
suggests his recognition of Lolita’s impending betrayal, along with implying her
transformation from the “girl-child” that he loves into an adult woman, whom he will
presumably have no sexual attraction toward. Looking at the assemblage of body parts
on the floor of store on Main Street, the novel’s implication is that Lolita will shortly be
reconstructed.

In its metaphorically overwrought way, this sequence also demonstrates
Humbert’s helplessness as a consumer; he lacks the control to rearrange the dummy
Lolita’s separate parts into a satisfying form, and must stand idly by as a “dapper” boy
vacuums between the arms and hair of his figurative lover. The fact that Humbert’s
undoing as Lolita’s partner comes while he gazes through a shop window underscores
the novel’s interest in the economic and consumerist aspects of their relationship. In
what follows, this chapter will examine how Nabokov’s novel represents postwar
consumer culture and what this has to do with the perverse and peculiar nature of the
“love story” that appears as the work’s central preoccupation. In particular, this chapter will examine the meaning behind Humbert’s tendency to pay Lolita for her sexual favors, pointing to the way that this practice tends to both give him continued access to Lolita, but also has the unintended consequence of delaying or deferring the pleasure that she might otherwise offer him. In short, Lolita’s unabashed and unrelenting consumption habits pose a problem for Nabokov’s narrator: Humbert, with only a modest supply of money, has a difficult time satisfying his young lover’s constant request for more things. The intellectual history and context that helps us make sense of this tension between Humbert’s financial difficulties and Lolita’s never-ending consumer demands is decisively Keynesian. Keynes’ theory that the supply of money available for consumption lagged behind the potential supply of actual goods, which caused a drag on demand, describes the situation that Humbert and Lolita find themselves in, and counts as the reason, above all others, why she eventually leaves him. To put it simply, Humbert discovers himself to be unable to allow his lover to consume at a rate that satiates her seemingly inexhaustible appetite for things. In what follows, this chapter will track the tension between the money that Humbert gives Lolita to have sexual relations with her and the consumer goods she buys—items such as magazines and candy—with the view toward seeing her continual and irrepressible desire to consume as a putting pressure on his meager income and savings account.

Nabokov’s most famous literary protagonist has often been read as an oppositional figure within the context of the postwar marketplace, and critics of Lolita

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have charted the way that his exploration of the New World satirizes American consumerism in the 1950s. Humbert’s Old World, European attitudes, by this account, presents a foil to Lolita’s unrelenting desire for the commodities advertised by mass media and popular culture. Such an interpretation, however, takes a far too narrow view of Humbert’s relationship to commercial culture. The family tree of Nabokov’s narrator, as he describes it at the beginning of the novel, is clearly inhabited by the economic animal spirits that certain critics of the novel see Humbert as disparaging. The “Old World European” gentlemen Humbert comes from a long line of merchants and business owners: his father “owned a luxurious hotel on the Riviera,” while “his [father’s] father and two grandfather’s [before] had sold wine, jewels and silk respectively” (9). With such a mercantile background, it makes sense that he would immigrate to the United States at the age of 29, after a business opportunity opens up for him across the Atlantic. Humbert expatriates to America following the death of an uncle, who bequeaths him a perfume concern located in New York City. It is stipulated in his late uncle’s will that the money that Humbert inherits from him can only be claimed “on the condition [that he] comes to live in the States and shows some interest in his business” (29). Although Humbert appears to be intrigued by the possibility of exploring this New World, which will provide him greater opportunity for exploring, and perhaps even indulging, his sexual interest in young girls, he is considerably less enamored by the

prospect of selling perfumes as an occupation. Unlike his father or extended family, Humbert does not seem to possess a significant desire for mercantile pursuits.

Thankfully, though, the firm that he turns up to manage does not require much of his intellectual labor or effort. Humbert contents himself initially in the “soft job” that his deceased uncle’s business offers, which, as he explains, “consisted mainly in thinking up and editing perfume ads. I welcomed its desultory character and pseudoliterary aspects,” he continues, “attending to it whenever I had nothing better to do” (32).

Shirking his inherited profession with disdain and indifference, Humbert instead spends the majority of his time in New York attending to his serious academic project of writing a “comparative history of French literature for English-speaking students” (Ibid). The literary critic Andrew Hoberek associates Humbert Humbert’s scholarly pursuits as an autodidact in Lolita, and the long hours he commits to his voluminous history of French literature, with Nabokov’s personal hostility to his employment as a creative writing instructor in the university system of the 1950s. According to Hoberek’s account, Nabokov rejected the “proletarization of mental labor,” which occurred during the postwar period in conjunction with the rise in American mass culture that turned writers into university employees in a way that mimicked other professional men entering large organizations in the 1950s.\footnote{Andrew Hoberek, The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 17.} Hoberek writes that the “the most interesting thing” about Lolita “is its intriguing resemblance to [a] model of individualism developed in postwar critiques of the white middle class.”\footnote{Ibid 53.} The critiques that Hoberek has in mind are those
that appeared in the 1950s—with titles like *White Collar* (1951) by C. Wright Mills and *Organization Man* (1956) by William Whyte—to decry the recent formation of a hierarchical and bureaucratically dense corporate culture in the United States. A remarkable number of sociological texts written in the immediate postwar era were troubled by supposed character transformations of the American worker, who, as Hoberek depicts him within the popular imagination of this period, had been forced to abandon his role as an independent entrepreneur/producer to become an “employee” in the economic machine of one of several large companies.

In *Lolita*, however, Humbert’s arduous intellectual labors occur because of, not despite, his academic and institutional affiliation: his history of French literature is a project “urged by a war-time university in New York” (32) It does not seem correct therefore to read this moment as one in which Nabokov’s narrator resists organizations in order to uphold a model independent scholarship as more virtuous. If anything, Humbert flees from the vulgar market of perfume advertisement into the welcoming institutional arms of academia. Such a trajectory might suggest, however, that Humbert desires to escape the commercial market in order to reside in the institution of the university, where serious intellectual scholarship replaces crass commercial enterprise. But Nabokov’s narrator does not reject his job as copy writer for his uncle’s perfume company to distance himself from the market; rather, he distances himself from the perfume company so that he may distinguish more sharply his already finely-honed habits and consumer tastes. For Humbert Humbert participation in a marketplace, albeit
of a highly specialized and peculiar sort, operates as the flipside of his exhausting and serious mental labors. As he explains:

The first volume [of his history of French literature] took me a couple of years during which I put in seldom less than fifteen hours of work daily. As I look back on those days, I see them divided tidily into ample light and narrow shade: the light pertaining to the solace of research in palatial libraries, the shade to my excruciating desire and insomnias...trying to catch a glimpse of nymphets playing in Central Park and how repulsed I was by deodorized career girls (32).

In his recent work, *The Program Era* (2009), Mark McGurl, in turn, focuses on the ascent of higher education, and the coincident development of creative writing workshops and their relationship to postwar fiction. He shows an interest in Nabokov because he was a novelist who exhibited a “streak of anti-intellectualism” that was fundamental to his work. This “streak of anti-intellectualism,” for McGurl is contained, managed if you will, by the institutional norms of the university writing programs, which provides a “buffer” between the novelist and the “culture industry and market culture [for fiction] more broadly.” The choice of Nabokov’s narrator to divide this time between stuffy libraries and the parks where he can “catch a glimpse of nymphets” speaks to his passion for inhabiting the consumer marketplace, while simultaneously keeping a metaphorical lid on these desires by ‘buffering’ them through the organization of the university.

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52 Ibid, 15
To understand Humbert as a consumer-scholar means appreciating the intellectual quality and refined nature of his consumer tastes. At the point in the text when he is watching young girls in the park, the narrator has already made readers privy to his highly-specified interest in “maidens” between “the age limits of nine and fourteen,” which he designates by the appellation of “nymphets.” In an earlier chapter, he goes to some lengths of distinguish his desire for “nymphets” from ordinary pederasty. “A normal man,” he explains, “given a group photograph of school girls or Girl Scouts and asked to point out the comeliest one will not necessarily choose the nymphet among them. You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins...in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs,” a true nymphet (17). Humbert’s ability to pick “nymphets” out of the crowd requires the keen aesthetic eye of an “artist,” but it also depends on possessing the desires of a “madmen,” which merely reinforces the portrait he paints of himself as both an intellectual and consumer. Nymphet enthusiasts such as Humbert need a “bubble of hot poison” in their “loins” in order to seek out the objects of their affection, but they also require certain aesthetic standards of taste.

Humbert’s character therefore is doubly marked by his talent for distinguishing between aesthetic categories—knowing the difference, in other words between nymphets and “deodorized career girls”—and his abrupt, and seemingly uncontrollable, desires. When it comes to his passion for nymphets, Humbert admits that he is unsure how it came about. “When I try to analyze my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth,” he explains, “I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the
analytical faculty with boundless alternatives” (13). The epistemological puzzle of Nabokov’s narrator in his attempt to discover the origins of his passion for nymphets offers a particularly postwar dilemma in understanding the habits and desires of consumers. He hypothesizes that his attraction to young girls may stem from his first romantic experience, which occurs after a sexual tryst with a child named Annabel when he is in his early teens. But he can never quite be sure of the primal scene that has led him down this path of sexual peccadilloes; when he traces his own “cravings” and “motives,” there are “boundless [interpretive] alternatives” that might explain his peculiar and idiosyncratic wants.

What Humbert does know with certainty is what he prefers, if not necessarily why he prefers it. He experiences “excruciating desires and insomnias” to “catch a glimpse of nymphets playing in Central Park,” despite his not knowing what precisely drives these desires. In the preceding chapter on Ralph Ellison, we encountered Paul Samuelson’s notion of consumer behavior, “Revealed Preference Theory,” which functioned as an attempt to formalize the mystery of consumer choice. In this instance, similar to the moment that appeared in Ellison’s novel, Humbert’s inability to understand his own desires refuses the neoclassical economic logic of post-Keynesians who would insist that consumer desires can be indexical. To summarize, while Humbert’s attraction to nymphets reveals, at least in his mind, his status as a high-minded intellectual, with an ability to make the fine distinctions between various kinds of women, on the one hand, it also makes him a victim of his own desires, on the other.

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The point is not, as McGurl suggests, that Nabokov (through his narrator) seeks immunity from the American commercial marketplace, or, as Hoberek would have it, that he resists the demands of the university system to avoid becoming at cliché 1950s figure of the “organizational man.”54 Rather, Humbert’s scholarly pursuits and his opaque sexual/consumer desires allow him to be a participant in American consumer culture, while simultaneously criticizing its excesses and the banality of the commodities in produces. Eventually, as the novel progresses, he will come to provide financial backing for the consumer habits an especially frivolous American consumer, his teenager lover Lolita, which is precisely the point in the work when his real difficulties begin.

2.

The point of the above section is to show how Humbert finds himself participating in the American consumer economy of the 1950s in his searching for nymphets, even as he tries to distinguish himself from it. Throughout the course of the novel, he affects a snobbish attitude toward certain displays of conspicuous consumption that cannot be easily ignored, but does not balk when it comes to actively and aggressively pursuing his own desires. When he first encounters the New England home of Mrs. Haze and her daughter Dolores (Lolita), for instance, Humbert mocks Mrs. Haze’s decidedly middlebrow taste in home décor: “The front hall” of their house, he condescendingly observes, “was graced with door chimes, a white-eyed wooden thingamabob of commercial Mexican origin, and that banal darling of the arty middle

54 See: William Whyte.
class, van Gogh’s ‘Arlésienne’” (36). Moments such as these seem could have been lifted straight from Dwight MacDonald’s famous essay “Midcult and Masscult,” which was originally published in 1952. Referring to the Vincent van Gogh’s painting “Arlésienne” as a “banal darling to the arty middle class,” Humbert associates it with the faux cultural sophistication sought by the newly affluent American middle classes in the postwar period. In MacDonald’s essay, he, too, calls attention to the difference between mass (or, what we might more traditionally call, popular) culture, on the one hand, and the new phenomenon of midcult as an example of ersatz cultural sophistication. “In these more advanced times,” MacDonald explains,

the danger to High Culture is not so much from Masscult as from a peculiar hybrid bred from the latter’s unnatural intercourse with the former. A whole middle culture has come into existence and threatens to absorb both its parents. This intermediate form—let us call it Midcult—has the essential qualities of Masscult—the formula, the built-in reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity—but it decently covers them with a cultural figleaf.

What makes Midcult so “dangerous” from MacDonald’s perspective, in other words, is that it has the pretensions of high culture, but has the content of Masscult. Covering its mass culture features with a “figleaf,” it apes the aesthetic conventions and standards of high art without actually committing itself to the intellectual complexity of high art. Van Gogh’s “Arlésienne” is a paradigmatic Midcult art work, which is why Humbert finds it so vulgar: it gives the “banal middle class” a way of expressing their preferences for quality

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55 Dwight MacDonald, Against the American Grain (New York: De Capo Press, Inc, 1983).
56 Ibid, 37.
art in works that do not challenge aesthetic standards in the way that actual high-modernist painting does.

Humbert’s repulsion to Mrs. Haze’s sense of home décor does not, however, prevent him from appreciating the virtues of one of her home’s inhabitants. Upon first meeting Mrs. Haze’s daughter, Dolores, Humbert is overwhelmed by his sexual attraction to her, but is also bothered by the commercial context in which she appears. “What drives me insane,” he admits, shortly after Dolores, whom he nicknames Lolita, comes into his life, “is the twofold nature of this nymphet—of every nymphet perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures” (44). The thing that Humbert wants to avoid is Lolita’s association with the sphere of American mass commerce—the “magazine pictures” that sexualize youth in an explicit way. Ideally, Nabokov’s narrator wishes to parse the difference between the commercial version of Lolita—who exists for and in the realm of mass media images—and Lolita as the innocent child of his erotic fantasies, preserving the latter as the economically unadulterated version of his nymphet love. Ironically, however, although Humbert finds the commercial version of Lolita to be vulgarized, he nonetheless must treat her as a commodity in order to the commit the sexual acts with her that he wants to commit.

The “magazine picture” of the virtual Lolita, by this account, enables Humbert to take advantage of her carnally without experiencing any of the guilt or loss of innocence that would result from her actual deflowering. In their first moment of erotic contact, which occurs after months of his pining away for her, Humbert, attired in a bathrobe,
has Lolita sit on his lap. He experiences an orgasm while she gyrates on top of him from his tickling her. In the aftermath of this incident, however, when all indications seem to suggest that he has taken advantage of a child’s innocence, he ensures himself that he did nothing wrong because he imagines that Lolita remained completely unaware that he climaxed on her. He further defuses his responsibility and guilt by imagining that he orgasms not on her body, but rather her image. In this way, he feels “proud” of his conquest because, as he claims,

I had stolen the honey of spasm without impairing the morals of the minor. Absolutely no harm done. I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, but my creation, another fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed no life of her own. The child knew nothing, I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that affected her as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon the screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark (62).

Humbert resides on shaky epistemological ground here: in truth, he has no idea what Lolita experiences during this episode, or indeed, if she is privy to the fact that he has used her body for his sexual pleasure. In his imagination, however, Lolita does not have any awareness stole he has stolen this “honey of spasm” with her. In order to remain steadfast in his belief, he convinces himself that she was not a person at this moment but an image—nothing more, in fact, than a “photographic image rippling upon a screen.” Humbert creates a commodified Lolita that he can sexually abuse, a
pornographic magazine picture of his nymphet, which spares him from internal self-doubt that he has, in fact, “impair[ed] the morals of a minor.”

In short, constructing Lolita as a vulgar commodity does not bother Humbert much when it results in his experiencing sexual fulfillment. When mass culture works to his advantage in his desire to orgasm on underage girls, he doesn’t seem even slightly perturbed by his participation in this economic arena. In fact, the only dilemma Humbert relates in referring to this experience is that he wants to consume Lolita in a more substantive way; stealing these masturbatory, pornographic delights leaves him feeling somewhat “pathetic.” In discussing his first conquest, Humbert explains that “I qualify [it] as pathetic because despite the insatiable fire of my venereal appetite, I intended, with the most fervent force and foresight to protect the purity of a twelve-year-old child” (62-63). Humbert doesn’t really want to “protect” Lolita, and he longs for more than merely having an orgasm on her magazine image. Rather, he desires to put his imprint on her body in a more inedible way.

The literary critic Ellen Pifer refers to Humbert’s fantasies to leave a mark on Lolita as a form of vampiracy. “In describing the rapture that overtakes him when he first gazes on the nymphet,” she writes:

Humbert…likens himself to a vampire: “the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty.” Significantly he fails to distinguish between his vampirish appetite and the vulnerability of his prey. Thus after his first fateful night with Lolita in the Enchanted Hunters hotel, Humbert is “anointed and ringed with the feel of her body” on which, like some “fairy tale vampire,” he has left “a purplish spots.” Far from belonging to a twelve year old, it is for him “the body of some immortal daemon disguised as a female child.” In
According to Pifer, by casting himself in the role of vampire, Nabokov’s narrator
consciously confuses and distorts the role between himself and Lolita, portraying her as
the predator and himself as prey. The “purplish spots” that appear on her body become
evidence of a kind of demonic possession not of his doing. In her reading, Humbert’s
refusal to take responsibility for the sexual marks that appear on his young lover’s body
point to his moral and spiritual bankruptcy.

Humbert’s vampirism of Lolita, however, also offers him away of participating in
postwar consumer markets. In his recent critique of the role of vampires (and other
non-human monsters) in popular culture, for instance, Rob Latham argues that these
blood-sucking demons “metaphorically embody the libidinal-political dynamics of the
consumerist ethos to which young people have been systematically habituated.” For
Latham, the recent rise of vampires in American culture—seen most strikingly in the
popular Twilight series—represents a desire for constant and ceaseless consumption.
“The vampire,” he writes, “is literally an insatiable consumer driven by a hunger for
perpetual youth.” Youth culture and vampires, then, operate by a reflexive logic:
vampires consume youth, while young people consume vampires. The end result is the
promotion of a consumer culture that is dedicated to encouraging the desires of young
people, and inevitably some older people as well, to continue to consume youth itself.

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58 Rob Latham, Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs and The Culture of Consumption (Chicago: University
59 Ibid.
Seen in this light, Humbert’s vampiric consumption of Lolita’s body validates his participation in a consumer culture that has increasingly become an appeal to youth market demographics. Latham’s book does not see this youth ad culture in America as a new phenomenon—and indeed in shouldn’t. The “discovery” in the 1950s that there existed an enormous sector of the economy, teenagers, rife for exploitation by Madison Avenue is a familiar enough narrative by this point that it needn’t be rehashed at any length—for those interested in this story AMC’s *Mad Men* offers a good primer. What is interesting though is that Nabokov’s middle-age narrator, who seemingly wants to set himself apart from American consumer culture and its banalities should seek so aggressively to be included in the vampiric consumption of youth culture.

Humbert’s criticism of his young lover’s enchantment with consumer culture appears often throughout the narrative, but his unhappiness with “the celestial trust” that she places in the mass media seems considerably lessened in light of his desire to consume her young body, thereby participating by proxy in the consumer culture Lolita enjoys without hesitation. Embarking on their cross-country road trip, the narrator expresses amazement at her willingness to direct her actions according to the dictates of ad copy. “If some café sign proclaimed Icecold Drinks,” Humbert explains, “she was automatically stirred, although drinks everywhere were ice-cold. She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal subject and object of every foul poster” (148). Although he characterizes these posters as “foul,” part of his anger might also be said to derive from the fact that these posters are “dedicated” to her, rather them to him. What really bothers Humbert about his young lover’s consumer habits, however, (more than the
fact that she possesses them, which he seems often, in his own bemused way, to admire her for) is that they serve as a substitute for affection he wants her to direct toward him. It pains him to acknowledge, for instance, that regardless of “the wonderland” he might “offer” his sexual partner, Lolita prefers “the corniest movies [and] the most cloying fudge” over his romantic embrace (166). As he sadly admits: “between a Hamburger and Humburger, she would—invariably, with icy precision—plump for the former” (Ibid). In lieu of convincing Lolita to prefer him as a commodity, as he clearly prefers her as a commodity, over other things, Humbert finds himself cast into the unenviable role of financing his lover’s consumption. The truly “pathetic” gesture on Humbert’s part comes not when he masturbates on her image, but rather when he decides to be Lolita’s financial benefactor, which ends up, curiously enough, undermining his ability to possess her, as well as destroying any possibility of her ever wanting him.

3.

Shortly following their first genuine sexual encounter in the Enchanted Hunters hotel—where Humbert takes Lolita after her mother is killed in an automobile accident—he begins acting as her banker for the consumer goods that she desires. Presenting her with the gift of a “lovely new purse of simulated calf” into which he slips “quite a few pennies and two mint-bright dimes” (138), Humbert establishes the basis for a relationship that consists of him essentially paying Lolita for sexual favors. As the narrative progresses, he finds this position increasingly untenable, largely because Lolita’s desire for consumption seems to have no reasonable limits. “Lord knows,” he
complains, after the two have been out on the road for a time, “how many nickels I feed to the gorgeous music boxes that came with every meal we had” (148). Humbert feeds nickels into these boxes so that his young lover can enjoy what he characterizes as “the nasal voices of those invisibles serenading her, people with names like Sammy and Jo and Tony and Peggy and Guy and Patty and Rex” (Ibid). Financing their trip on the inheritance of his late uncle’s perfume business, Humbert begins to notice though that all these nickels he feeds into jukeboxes adds up. He feels his “income…cracking under the strain of [his] joy-ride” (175) with Lolita, but fails to come up with any alternative schema that might reduce this financial strain. Lolita, the novel suggests, has began to count on the fact that Humbert will fork over the money when she desires some particular good.

Beyond the pressure it puts on his meager income, subsidizing Lolita’s expenses in this way does not enable Humbert achieve his end goal, which is to make his lover reliant on him, and thus ensure that she will obey his orders and desires. Instead, giving Lolita money allows her to take him entirely for granted. He enjoins the reader of his narrative to “laugh not, as you imagine me, on the very rack of joy noisily emitting dimes and quarters, and great silver dollars like some sonorous, jingly and wholly demented machine vomiting riches” (184). This salient image of Humbert as a bank “vomiting riches” on his underage girlfriend appears during a sequence when he discovers that Lolita has been stealing from him. Her purpose in taking his money, he reasons, is that she plans to run away from him. What “I feared most,” Humbert explains, when he becomes privy to the fact that Lolita has taken to hiding his money in the walls of her
bedroom, “was not that she might ruin me, but that she might accumulate sufficient cash to run away....I believe the poor fierce eyed child had figured out that with a mere fifty dollars in her purse she might somehow reach Broadway or Hollywood” (185). The money that the novel’s narrator initially gives Lolita in order to make her more compliant instead has the effect of laying the groundwork for her thoughts of rebellion and escaping from him.

At the very least, one might expect that the money Humbert gives Lolita facilitates the exchange of capital for sexual favors. But even this seems a debatable point; from a certain perspective, the novel shows how money operates to defer or delay Humbert’s sexual conquest of his lover. At the very beginning of their cross-country journey, in fact, the appearance of money coincides with Humbert’s needing to postpone his consummation of his relationship with Lolita. When Mrs. Haze perishes in the car accident, the narrator seizes the opportunity to “whizz [sic] over to Camp Q [where his step-daughter is spending her summer vacation], tell Lolita her mother was about to undergo a major operation at an invented hospital, and then keep moving with my sleepy nymphet from inn to inn while her mother got better and better and finally died” (106). Humbert’s elaborate scheme, however, meets its first snag when he places a call to Camp Q on a payphone outside of town; “Holmes, the camp mistress,” he recalls, “informed me that Dolly [Lolita] had gone Monday (this was Wednesday) on a hike in the hills with her group and was expected to return rather late today” (Ibid). Momentarily stymied in his plans to take Lolita, Humbert hangs up the telephone, and as “[t]he two voices parted in an explosion of warmth and goodwill...through some freak
mechanical flaw all my coins came tumbling back to me with a hitting-the-jackpot clatter that almost made me laugh despite the disappointment at having to postpone bliss” (Ibid). The mechanically-flawed phone that ejects Humbert’s coins back to him serves as a potent economic metaphor for his relationship with Lolita.

The macroeconomic model that underscores Lolita’s depiction of how money works to delay, defer, or—as is the case with Lolita’s plan to run away—prohibit Humbert’s enjoyment of erotic pleasure possesses a Keynesian hue. As the economist Hyman Minsky (who appears in the introduction and elsewhere in this project), one of Keynes’ best and most faithful interpreters, reminds his readers, the challenge posed by The General Theory questioned the conventional wisdom of the quantity of money theory of economy. Prior to the publication of Keynesian theory in the late 1930s, Minsky explains that “[t]he inherited quantity theory of money held that in the long run, money is a neutral veil which does not fundamentally affect the operations of the economy.”60 In short, quantity of money advocates maintained the prices of goods and labor would adjust to the available supply of money in the economy at any given time. It was argued that no rational person would want to hold onto money in its liquid form (as cash) because it was an asset that would decline in value over the long run due to a natural inflation in the prices of commodities. As Minsky points out, however, Keynes understood that having a predilection to hold money, especially during times of economic crisis, was hardly a novel occurrence. Even during normal economic times—and the 1930s could hardly be described as normal economic times—many people

acting on the market had savings accounts, which meant that at least some of the available money supply would be unavailable for consumption. What Keynes recognized, therefore, was that money was not “neutral” in the way that conventional economy theory had maintained because individuals could choose to withhold their money from the economy, deferring the pleasure gained by consuming some commodity today, in order to consume another or the same commodity tomorrow. (This, of course, became a problem in economies in recession because the deferral of purchasing exacerbated already poor economic conditions).

In the Keynesian theory, money, in other words, enables an economic agent to “postpone bliss,” which constitutes, in many circumstances, a macroeconomic problem. When the coins in the payphone come back to Humbert, he realizes that he will be put off from seeing Lolita until the next day. Money, in other words, introduces a temporal futurity of delayed gratification that works of the detriment of Nabokov’s narrator in this particular instance; Humbert would prefer to have Lolita in his possession as soon as possible. This is not the first occasion, moreover, in Nabokov’s work when money and its impact on temporality come into play—exchange, in the Keynesian sense, is the temporality of money transferred into commodity form. In his memoirs Speak, Memory (1951), Nabokov associates financial wealth with the persistence of childhood memory and the warm feelings he remembers from his youth. Interestingly, Nabokov’s remembrances of his early years in pre-Bolshevik Russia do not focus much on the Leninist overhaul of the state, and his family’s subsequent economic dispossession. Although in the middle of Chapter 3, in an extended discussion of his upper class
Russian family, he mentions, almost in passing, that “[w]hen [his] Uncle Ruka died, at the end of 1916, he left me what would amount nowadays to a couple of million dollars and his country estate, with its white-pillared mansion on a green, escarped hill….The house, I am told, still stood there in 1940, nationalized but aloof, a museum piece for any sightseeing traveler.”

Almost immediately, lest the reader think that Nabokov is bitter about the fact that his family fortune was seized by the Communists, he makes a particularly aggressive aside:

The following passage is not for the general reader, but for the particular idiot who, because he lost a fortune in some crash, thinks he understands me. My old (since 1917) quarrel with the Soviet dictatorship is wholly unrelated to the question of property. My contempt for the émigré who “hates the Reds” because they “stole” his money and land is complete. The nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood, not the sorrow for lost banknotes.

Insisting that he mourns his “lost childhood” more than the “sorrow of lost banknotes,” Nabokov distinguishes himself from the resentful émigrés who hate the Bolsheviks because they robbed them of their property and wealth. At the same time, however, by turning a story of lost millions and the estate of his late uncle into a story about lost childhood, Nabokov underscores money’s temporal significance. The thing that enables him to tell his story about Russia before 1917 is that it is irretrievable except through narrative, and what makes it irretrievable is the disappearance of his money.

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*Speak, Memory* is a memoir about losing one’s lineage; the history of the Nabokov family is halted by the Communists appropriation of their wealth in 1917, and the family flees to begin life anew in Europe. *Lolita*, on the other hand, focuses on Humbert’s inability to possess his lover in the present, despite the fact that, for all intents and purposes, she remains under his control for a great portion of the narrative. Money, from the standpoint of the novel, fails to guarantee that Lolita will commit herself to Humbert because it defers and delays his ownership of her. For this reason, it is fitting that Nabokov’s narrator loses Lolita to a rival—Clare Quilty, the playwright who comes to Lolita’s school midway through the book after Humbert and she settle momentarily in the town of Beardsley—who knows how to spend his own substantial fortune in a more effective way. Unlike the narrator, Quilty is a figure at home in the postwar consumer marketplace, possessing a vast understanding of how to shop for the commodities that he and Lolita will enjoy. Humbert observes Quilty’s prowess as a consumer firsthand when the playwright begins to follow the couple as they leave Beardsley and head back onto the open road. The narrator refers to Quilty as a “veritable Proteus of the highway,” noting the “bewildering ease [with which he] switched from one vehicle to another....He seemed to patronize at first the Chevrolet genus, beginning with a Campus Cream convertible, then going to a small Horizon blue sedan, and thenceforth fading into Surf Gray and Driftwood Gray (227). The playwright’s aptitude for switching vehicles suggests to Humbert that he must have access to “garages specializing in ‘stage-automobile’ operations” (Ibid). This would make sense
given Quilty’s profession as a writer and producer of Hollywood films and theatrical productions.

Whatever resources Quilty has at his disposal to enable him to seemingly change cars quickly, however, his supposed keenness for automotive shape shifting identifies him as a savvy consumer. With his ability to exchange one commodity for another of infinite variety, he expresses his knack for participating in America’s vibrant consumer culture, which values nothing quite so much as a continual commitment to shopping for the new. Quilty does not even so much exchange cars: his convertible rather ‘fades’ into a sedan like a Technicolor spec auto on a display room floor. While Nabokov’s narrator disparages the playwright for this reason, characterizing him as a low class ad man whose “main trait was his passion for tantalization” (250), it is also abundantly clear that Quilty has, due to his ability to navigate the contours of the consumer marketplace, a leg up when it comes to winning the affections of Lolita. When Humbert’s underage lover leaves him for Quilty, she does so because he offers her access to this world of glittering commodities. All the money in the world—and Humbert clearly does not possess endless financial resources—are no match for the scintillating world of consumer goods that the playwright possesses. Despite the fact that Quilty has more money than Humbert, Lolita suggests that it is not his money, but the allure of Hollywood—he promises her a job in motion pictures—and the fantastically commodified images that play across the screen that appeals to Lolita. In the world of monetary stability that Humbert Humbert inhabits, money functions as a poor substitute in comparison to the gleaming attraction of these virtual commodities.
Lolita abandons Humbert for Quilty and his consumer habits, and the narrator is left for some years to wander in the literal wilderness of America’s vast system of highways. At first, he tries to track down the fleeing couple, but eventually decides to quit this search. Then, after much time has passed, Lolita contacts Humbert; he discovers her living in the purlieu of a town in New York with a husband named Dick Schiller. Lolita writes to Humbert because she once again needs money; she and her husband want to travel to Alaska for work. Finding her living in meager conditions, in a final moment of desperation, Nabokov’s narrator hastily hands Lolita a check for $3,600, along with $400 in cash, and begs her to return to him. Realizing that he is fighting a losing effort, he quickly dries his eyes to stem the flow of tears, and shifts back to the matter at hand: “Finally,” he reports, “I reverted to money matters. That sum [the check], I said, represented more of less the net rent from her mother’s house” (279). Humbert, even though he realizes that he will never possess Lolita again, continues to play the role of her banker, coming to her financial rescue when she needs him. Although she denies, with what Humbert calls heartbreaking “indifference” the memories of their past life together, he still holds out the hope that her affections will be available for a cash sale. Standing outside the car in which they began and ended their cross-country travels together, he offers her yet another $500 dollars—ostensibly as payment for the car—so that he may hold on to even the slightest, most “microscopic hope” that will one day return to him. Smiling all the while, she tells him that she will never return, regardless, it seems, of whatever amount of money he spends, cutting the last financial and erotic ties that bind her and Humbert together.
The novel does not end here, however, but climaxes with Humbert’s tracking down and killing Clare Quilty. (The conclusion of *Lolita* possesses a Hollywood-esque quality that enhances the novel’s commercial appeal: it’s almost as though Nabokov thought that screenwriters would fail to see the appeal in his intellectual property if he neglected to add a murder at the end.) Making his fervent escape after shooting the playwright to death in his mansion, the narrator gets into a motor accident—purposefully crashing his car and going off the road. With his automobile camped in a pasture, awaiting the impending arrival of police officers and emergency vehicles, Humbert has a daydream. Remembering an afternoon shortly after Lolita’s disappearance, when a sudden stomach illness forced him to pull over on the highway, he recalls taking a walk and stopping to observe a “small mining town” nestled in a valley beneath the road. As Humbert stands and gazes idly at the geometrical shape of the rooftops of the town, he hears the distinct sound of the “melody of children at play” (308). “I stood,” he concludes, “listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (Ibid). Partly, this final vision demonstrates the guilt that the narrator feels for robbing Lolita of her childhood. By taking her away at such a young age, Humbert acknowledges that he did in fact steal Lolita’s innocence. At the same time, however, in his remorse and melancholy, Humbert is led to imagine his lover not as a distinct person with a singular voice, but as a part of the “concord” of children voices that arise from below. This reified Lolita comes as a
fleeting counter-image to the twelve-year-old girl whom he has attempted to bribe into
sexual complicity throughout the course of the narrative. The hope that this last
representation of Lolita underscores is the desire for a consumer marketplace free from
the beguiling erotic temptations and financial operations of men such as Humbert Humbert.
Tom Ripley’s Corporate Risk

1.

Patricia Highsmith’s titular sociopath, Tom Ripley, who appears as the main character in a pentalogy of detective novels that she wrote between the years of 1955 and 1991, offers a fascinating case study in abnormal psychology. Ripley’s appetite for murder, and his predilection for playing games that lead to murder, make him a proto-example of the gentleman maniacs and serial killers that have appeared with some frequency in popular culture over the past two decades. What makes Ripley unique among his fictional homicidal peers, however, is that his various crimes and murders constitute a critique, or at the very least show an interest, in the social structures and organizational forms that determine modern, American life in the postwar decades. As Mark Seltzer points out in an essay on the third Ripley novel, Ripley’s Game (1974), the social rules of the game provide a crucial context for enabling Tom’s murders to be carried out in Highsmith’s narratives. The games that Tom Ripley plays, according to Seltzer, are not merely effective plot devices, but rather comment on how the entire “modern social field” is constructed. In Ripley’s Game, he argues, contemporary social life is shown to be nothing less than an “intensified self-organization of a system of self-organizing systems.” The form of the game, for Seltzer, in other words, is merely one social organization among many; other “self-organizing systems” within this...

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63 The most salient example of which might be Hannibal Lecter, the well-known antihero of Thomas Harris’s series of crime-horror novels—Red Dragon (1981), Silence of the Lambs (1988), Hannibal (1999) and Hannibal Rising (2006). Although Tom Ripley does not share Lecter’s more gruesome commitments to violence—namely the latter’s taste for human flesh—both characters are brilliant, cultured men who lack any semblance of normative social values.

organizational system include bureaucratic entities such as the postal service and various other corporate infrastructures.

Seltzer’s reading amplifies Tom Ripley’s curious relationship to bureaucratic and organizational forms of social life. On the one hand, Highsmith’s protagonist very much plays the role of a kind of puppet master, encouraging and directing others to commit heinous acts that they would not otherwise by manipulating the terms and rules of the game. On the other hand, Tom’s reliance on organizational structures to accomplish his aims throughout the series makes him peculiar outlier from the perspective of the critique of corporate, rule-based life that was fully underway by the time Highsmith’s first novel, The Talented Mr. Ripley (1955), was published. William Whyte’s famous sociological treatise, The Organization Man, which elucidated the psychological costs that the increasing importance of corporations and their bureaucratic management structure had on America’s white-collar force, came out the next year in 1956. In this work, Whyte distinguishes between the “popular fiction” written when the “Protestant ethic,” which promoted an ethos of individualism and self-sufficiency, was in “full flower” (during a period, seemingly somewhat arbitrarily dated, “around the 1870s”) with the fiction of his current day.65 “In the older fiction,” he argues, “there was some element of conflict between the individual and his environment,” whereas modern literature, in keeping with the impulse toward conformity that pervaded postwar society as a whole, “is so benevolent that there is no conflict left for anyone to be rebellious

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about.”\textsuperscript{66} Listing examples of novels that uphold this virtue of conformity, Whyte mentions Herman Wouk’s 1952 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, \textit{The Caine Mutiny}, which depicts the fictional events aboard a minesweeping vessel during WWII. Wouk’s book criticizes the decision of Lieutenant Stephen Maryk and the ship’s crew to overthrow its tyrannical captain, Philip Francis Queeg, “with [the] implied moral,” Whyte avers, “that it would have been better to let [a] ship and several hundred men perish rather than question authority.”\textsuperscript{67}

Whyte was not alone in noting the ‘disturbing trend’ in postwar culture of men cowing to the authority of their metaphorical captains. Work after work, from David Riesman’s \textit{The Lonely Crowd} (1950) to C. Wright Mills’ \textit{White Collar} (1951) to Lionel Trilling’s \textit{The Liberal Imagination} (1950), fretted over the perceived loss of agency for middleclass Americans, and, particularly for a scholar such as Trilling, the degradation of aesthetic standards that came as a result of this loss.\textsuperscript{68} Although this crisis of agency is associated mainly with the 1950s, when the liberal bureaucratic state and the large corporate industries it supported achieved a newfound relevance following the rise of the federally-managed war economy, social theorists writing in the 1960s and 1970s shared many of the same concerns as their 1950s forebears. In 1979, Christopher

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, 251.  
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, 245.  
\textsuperscript{68} Lionel Trilling’s essay “Art and Fortune” drew parallels between the dull literature of the 1950s and the postwar period’s commitment to fostering a classless society. [\textit{The Liberal Imagination} (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), 255-281]. The notion that capitalist class stratification made for better literature was also a theme that resonated for William Whyte, who argues that organizational novels such as Wouk’s \textit{Caine Mutiny} prefer the financial comfort and security of middleclass life above the freedom of men to make their own way in the world. This brand of postwar fiction can be seen in opposition to that of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, which celebrated acquisition and the ethical position of America’s entrepreneurial classes.
Lasch’s popular work *The Culture of Narcissism* took stock of the net result of decades of Americans increasing awareness of the social expectations of their bosses and peers. During “[o]ur own time,” he writes on the eve of Reagan’s election, the “invasion of private life by the forces of organized domination has become so pervasive that personal life has almost ceased to exist.” What Lasch describes is the complete integration of the personal realm of life within the “self-organizing systems”—to return to Seltzer’s formulation—that comprise the modern social field.

The question that this essay will take up, therefore, concerns the extent to which Highsmith’s charismatic protagonist Tom Ripley—and I will be interested, in particular, in the first book of this series, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (which, again, was published at the height of this postwar anxiety about individuality)—depends on organizational and corporate structures for his success, and what this means given the postwar critique of organizations in the sociological literature of this period. Seltzer’s interpretation of *Ripley’s Game* offers a key to understanding the uniqueness of Highsmith’s approach to forms of social organization; as he points out, the “self-organizing systems” that Tom makes use of in order to play games with other people’s lives constitute a microcosm of a larger organizational system. In other words, there are different levels when it comes to organizational forms, which suggests not only that there are different varieties of organizations, but also that they differ in size and influence.

In what follows, I will situate Highsmith’s Ripley novels within the context of an economic discourse that first emerged in the late 1930s, and rose to prominence in the

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1940s and 1950s under the appellation of the “New Institutional Economics,” which was also interested in the interplay between markets, as a diminutive version of a “self-organizing system” and larger bureaucratic and organizational structures. This school of economic, which sought to redefine the relationship between private market activity and the institutional or organizational forces that had begun to exert more control over economic decisions beginning with the creation of the New Deal State in the 1930s provides an important, although rarely acknowledged, complement to the predominant economic perspectives of the period. What this theory offers, in essence, is a theoretical adjunct to the Keynesian theory and the latter’s explicit commitment to relying on governmental institutions to manage economic change.71

Understanding how New Institutional Economics negotiated the ideological commitments emphasized by postwar social theory, which was concerned with the loss of individual agency that coincided with the disappearance of capitalist marketplaces, and the bureaucratically-managed state, will allow us to appreciate the significance of Tom Ripley’s simultaneous rejection and acceptance of employment within the

70 In thinking about the market as a “self-organizing system,” I am thinking about the conservative, free-market proponent F.A. Hayek’s interpretation of the market as a “system of telecommunications.” Hayek will appear later in this essay as an example of thinker with a distinctly anti-organizational attitude, although his theory of markets could, under creative enough interpretation, lend itself to organizational paradigms.
71 During the 1950s, many liberals saw that the United States had not gone the way of the Soviet-style bureaucratic management of economic affairs. The hypothesis advanced by James Burnham’s 1940 book The Managerial Revolution (New York: The John Day Company, Inc., 1941) turned out not to come to fruition. Burnham argued that the outcome of WWII was negligible compared to the social revolution that was occurring simultaneously in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia and the United States, which was replacing private capitalistic enterprise with a public state-run economy. This is not to say that the American government wasn’t a large presence in the postwar period and didn’t play a fundamental role in directing economic activity, which was most certainly the case. Understanding, precisely, the relationship between organizational/governmental institutions and ostensibly private companies became a pertinent political and economic question.
organization of Richard Greenleaf’s shipping concern. At the beginning of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the major dilemma for Patricia Highsmith’s protagonist is that he cannot find an employer willing to make use of his particular skill set. As the title of her novel suggests, Tom possesses considerable talent for many things: he is gifted at impersonation and mimicry, turns out to be an accomplished forger, and has “a talent for mathematics.”

Despite this impressive array of skills, however, when Richard Greenleaf first approaches Ripley in a New York bar, with the intention of enlisting his assistance in convincing his son, Dickie Greenleaf, into returning from his extended Italian sojourn to spend time with his sick mother, Tom is living a hand-to-mouth existence and finds himself in dire financial straits. He cannot help but compare his situation unfavorably to the person he is asked to persuade to return home:

> Tom thought that Dickie was probably having the time of his life over [in Italy]. An income, a house, a boat. Why should he want to come home? Dickie was lucky. What was he himself doing at twenty-five? Living from week to week. No bank account...He had a talent for mathematics. Why the hell didn’t they pay him for it, somewhere? (14).

Tom’s envy of Dickie’s charmed life quickly devolves into a vociferous complaint that nobody is willing to pay him for his “talent in mathematics.” Ripley soon discovers, however, that his skill for impersonation and his considerable personal charm are sufficient to secure a job with Mr. Greenleaf. Exaggerating the degree of intimacy between he and Dickie, and also inventing an upper-class pedigree for himself that

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72 Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (W.W. Norton and Company; Reprint Edition, 2008), 14. Subsequent quotations from this work will be quoted parenthetically.
includes a degree from Princeton, Tom convinces Richard Greenleaf to provide him with a $600 dollar stipend and first-class passage on an Atlantic ocean liner so that he may travel to Italy to retrieve his son.

In agreeing to do this job for Mr. Greenleaf, Ripley effectively becomes an employee for Burke-Greenleaf Watercraft, Inc., which is the shipbuilding firm owned by Richard senior. Tom’s status as an employee is reinforced by the fact that the money he receives, along with the checks that Dickie claims as his stipend, while on permanent vacation in Italy, comes directly from the accounts of Burke-Greenleaf Watercraft. Despite, therefore, the peculiar nature of Tom’s employment, when he agrees to carry out this job for Mr. Greenleaf, he becomes very much a company man, performing his occupation on the corporate payroll. From the standpoint of America’s most preeminent liberal economist and a consistent proponent of state planning of the economy, the relationship between Mr. Greenleaf and Tom is, in fact, paradigmatic of the rise of organizational management of the corporate infrastructure during the postwar period. In his book *The New Industrial State* (1967), John Kenneth Galbraith argues that the rise of concentrated corporate entities in the postwar period “have greatly increased the need of…the enterprise for specialized talent and its organization.”

“The planning system,” he continues, unlike the market or price system that came before it, must rely, in the main, on external sources for [its] talent. Unlike capital, [talent] is not something the firm can supply in any comprehensive fashion to itself. To be effective, this talent must also be in

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the organization. Given a competent business organization, capital is now ordinarily available. But the mere possession of capital is now no guarantee that the requisite talent can be obtained and organized.\(^\text{74}\)

Claiming that talent is the thing that business organizations in the postwar decades need most, Galbraith points to the fact that the large corporations of this era no longer rely on markets in the traditional sense. Making money, he argues, (channeling sentiments similar to those of business organizations theorists such as Peter Drucker\(^\text{75}\)) is not the chief concern of corporations in this period; most firms, in fact, can take capital for granted in the course of their short- and long-term operational needs. The thing that companies must aggressively pursue instead is talent, which is difficult to come by, and has a value for corporate enterprise that it is hard to overvalue or dismiss out of hand.

Tom Ripley represents an “external source” of “talent” in the Galbraithian sense and Richard Greenleaf, as the part-owner of Burke-Greenleaf Watercraft Inc., must woo him and bring under his corporation’s umbrella. The elder Greenleaf might even consider himself lucky, at least in the beginning, to find such a talented young man whose skill set is being underutilized by other market agents. Unfortunately for Richard Greenleaf, however, Tom turns out to be a less than reliable employee; in large part, it is not Ripley’s fault that he must betray his employer almost immediately after he arrives in Italy. Dickie Greenleaf, the wayward son that Tom has been hired to retrieve, wants

\(^{74}\) Ibid, 70.

nothing to do with him at first: he initially considers Tom to be an interloper, disturbing the life of luxury and the peace he has enjoyed as an American exile. Dickie views Tom as an intrusion, upsetting the normal balance and the life that he has forged with the native Italians in the village. Ripley must risk his job with Richard Greenleaf by exposing the true purpose of his journey to Italy to Dickie; otherwise, he fears that the younger Greenleaf will simply ignore him entirely (55-57). In an exchange that takes place at the hotel that Tom has rented near Dickie’s beach house, he reveals the true purpose of his Italian “vacation.” “Your father sent me over here especially to ask you to come home’” he explains to Dickie (56). Rather than rejecting Ripley for this admission, Dickie, as Tom has hoped, is greatly amused by the fact that his father would go to such lengths to get him to return to the United States. He knows that his father is keen that he should one day take charge of his family’s shipping business, but does not realize quite how adamant Mr. Greenleaf is. When Tom explains the circumstances of his arrival in Italy, a friendship blossoms between the two men that is largely based on Dickie’s resentment toward his father meddling in his life.

The result of Dickie and Tom’s newfound camaraderie, however, does not destroy the latter’s connection to the Greenleaf family or their business. In fact, Ripley achieves even greater access to the Greenleaf’s money and becomes an even more integral part of their empire after he reveals his true mission to Dickie. When, for instance, he explains to Dickie that his father is subsidizing his trip, the younger Greenleaf tells Tom not to bother paying his father back. He shrugs off Ripley’s taking the Greenleaf’s money, explaining that it comes from “the Burke-Greenleaf expense list”
(57). Tom’s betrayal of his mission and job contract with Richard Greenleaf does not, in the beginning at least, threaten his employment with Burke-Greenleaf Watercraft, Inc., or obstruct his access to the Greenleaf’s money. Ultimately, what Tom wants is to be included in the same social set as the Greenleaf’s, and have the same economic opportunities that they do: whether this means working for Dickie’s father or becoming a boon companion of Dickie himself. His employment record may be spurious, but he uses the exact same talents to ingratiate himself to Dickie that he did with his father. Shortly after Ripley’s revelation of his mission, he performs a “pantomime” of a proper English gentlewoman, comically named “Lady Assburton” getting on to her first American subway (59). Greatly amused by Tom’s performance, Dickie begins to partly subsidize his friend’s extended holiday, taken in by Ripley’s skill for impersonation in much the same way that Mr. Greenleaf was impressed by Tom’s faked Princeton credentials.

Only when the relationship between Dickie and Tom begins to sour—after Marge, Dickie’s Italian companion and lover, discovers Tom dressing up in Dickie’s clothes—does Ripley come up with an alternative scheme for continuing his association with the Greenleaf family. Realizing that Dickie has begun to distance himself from him, calling off plans and otherwise limiting their interaction, does Ripley begin to construct a plot for his friend’s murder. The incident that sets Tom on the path toward his eventual killing of Dickie occurs while their friendship is slowly unraveling—in part because Dickie suspects that Tom has developed a homosexual crush on him—when Ripley meets a drug dealer in a nearby Italian bar who offers him and a friend (Dickie) $300 dollars to
be escorted to Paris in coffins (84). Excited by the possibilities of this opportunity, Tom eagerly presents it to Dickie, who, quite understandably, expresses reservations about involving himself in what appears to be a plot to transport drugs across national borders. Ripley chastises his friend for being overly cautious, believing that it shows that “Dickie was still hedging about Paris” (85), which was a trip they had planned to take together earlier in the novel when their relationship was on firmer footing. Tom desires to see Paris, which he has glimpsed only briefly from train window while passing through to Italy, and this offer appears to him to be the perfect way to see Paris without having to bear the large costs that such a trip would entail. Dickie, on the other hand, can be more cautious about committing himself to such a dubious enterprise because, unlike Tom, he always has his $500 monthly inheritance to fall back on; the money that Tom has, in contrast, is limited and he must be more careful about how he spends it—at this point in the novel, a trip to Paris would put serious strain on his dwindling budget.

The dilemma, therefore, from Tom’s perspective is that he needs Dickie to agree to travel to Paris with him by this unusual method if he has any hope of seeing Paris. Ripley possesses a strong desire to be a person of financial means whose life involves experiencing the culture of Europe’s famous cities, but he lacks the resources to accomplish this goal. In economic terms, Tom cannot afford to bear the transactional costs associated with being a person of culture and elite taste. Dickie, however, can bear these costs because, by the mere accident of birthright, he is a beneficiary of the corporate entity of Burke-Greenleaf Watercraft. Tom’s fear, when both Dickie and his father effectively announce that they are withdrawing their support of him is that he
will be reduced to his former insecurity and unemployment. In essence, Ripley comes to understand very early in the novel that lacking the identity of a Greenleaf, he puts himself in precarious economic and social position.

In an essay written in 1937 called “The Nature of the Firm,” the economist R.H. Coase questioned why individuals cooperated and formed corporations, rather than participating in the marketplace as private persons. His overarching inquiry was why economic cooperation existed at all: what good did it serve to create a firm of employees working to ensure the profit of their owner? The general attitude toward private economic enterprise at the time had been severely imperiled by the Depression, which had undermined confidence in markets as mechanisms for ensuring socially beneficial outcomes. Prominent leftwing economists, such as the English economist Maurice Dobbs and the American Joan Robinson, argued that the government needed to establish certain institutional structures that stemmed the excesses of private market activity and redistributed the national income in a more equitable fashion. They proposed an economic model in which governments joined large corporate entities to make rational decisions about production.

On the flip side of this current of thought that desired more government intervention in the economy were a contingent of rightwing theorists—named the “Austrian school”—who rejected state intervention in market affairs and institutional control as infringements on individual freedom. F.A. Hayek (mentioned in an earlier footnote), one of the most committed advocates of laissez-faire methods, went so far as

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to compare leftwing economic planning and the New Deal state to the totalitarian methods of the Third Reich and European fascism. R.H. Coase’s work on firms and markets, which would later provide impetus for the intellectual output of the more sober faction of the University of Chicago’s School of Economics under the rubric of The New Institutional Economics in the 1950s, split the difference between these two camps. By focusing on economic cooperation and the establishment of firms as a natural phenomenon, Coase offered a rebuttal to the notion of market man as an independent and isolated agent—an idea advanced by free-market proponents. The practice of coordination among ostensibly independent economic operators in the generation of corporate forms of organization proved for Coase that the free market system did not always ensure the most efficient allocation of resources. At the same time, “The Nature of the Firm” does not argue that corporate forms of economic cooperation should, as a normative matter, reject the market and price model entirely in favor of increasing the social good as leftwing economists such as Robinson and Dobbs, or business

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78 During the end of the 1960s, and on through the 1970s, the Economics Department at Chicago experienced a rift between two camps of its faculty over the issue of whether institutions, as the Federal Reserve for example, could be viewed as playing a role in the economy at all. Milton Friedman, despite his clear faith in markets as mechanisms for the rational distribution of goods, nonetheless acknowledged the impact that monetary policy, implemented by the Fed system and American government, had on the economy. As Perry Mehrling states, “the divergence between Friedman and [Franco] Modigliani [an economist trained in Keynesianism] on practical policy should not be allowed to obscure their underlying agreement on matters of monetary theory. Both Friedman and Modigliani accepted the [fact] of money as applicable in the full-employment long run. Both also accepted that money has effects on income in the short run.” [Fischer Black and the Revolutionary Idea of Finance (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2005), 152]. What these two economists agreed upon (one a so-called monetarist and the other a Keynesian), in other words, was that public policy and political decisions about the U.S. economy made a real difference. Friedman, however, was opposed by a contingent of younger economists, figures such as Fischer Black and Eugene Fama, who argued the markets were entirely immune to the direction and mandates of external institutional structures. These latter theorists of markets rejected even the version of institutions as provisional structures, which ultimately served the efficiency of markets, advanced by economists such as R.H. Coase and his “New Institutional” contemporaries in the 1950s.
organization theorists such as Peter Drucker, would argue.\textsuperscript{79} Firms, in Coase’s view, existed because they served an important market function: they enabled, in certain situations and under certain conditions, for transactional costs, which are those costs associated with carrying out a business transaction, to be lower than they otherwise would be for private entrepreneurs and independent economic agents. “The main reason,” as he writes, “why it is profitable to establish [a firm] would seem to be that there is a cost of using the price mechanism,” and corporate organizations are better equipped to absorb and mitigate these costs.\textsuperscript{80}

In Highsmith’s \textit{The Talented Mr. Ripley}, there are costs associated with Tom’s accumulation of social and cultural capital. It is easier for him to travel to Paris, for instance, and Italy when he as an employee or representative of the Burke-Greenleaf corporation or a proxy member of the Greenleaf family; Dickie’s unwillingness to join Tom on his excursion to Paris in coffins raises the cost of his travels, which he finds it impossible to bear on his own. Dickie’s abandoning of Ripley at this moment in the narrative, his refusal to allow Tom to continue to use his name and financial privileges attached to that name, precipitate Tom’s decision to murder his friend. Ripley’s reasons for killing Dickie are fairly straightforward: he desires to continue using the Greenleaf name in order to maintain the social and economic privileges that come from belonging to this wealthy family. During a brief vacation to the Italian beach town of San Remo, the two men climb abroad a boat for an afternoon of sailing. After Tom beats his friend

\textsuperscript{79} Drucker argued that corporations were the “representative social institution[s] of our society,” and possessed “a social function in a community [which] is as important as its economic function as an efficient producer,” \textit{The Concept of the Corporation}, 140.

\textsuperscript{80} Coase, 38.
to death with an oar, he goes about stripping Dickie’s body of its identifying features—not, as one might assume, in order to cover-up the murder, but to begin his masquerade as a Greenleaf. Ripley removes his friend’s “green ring,” which bears the escutcheon of the Greenleaf family shield, his “silver lighter” and “alligator wallet” (103); by divesting Dickie of his personal effects, Tom believes that he has accomplished his goal of making his friend “disappear completely” (99; italics original). In treating Dickie as nothing more than a composite figure of certain removable and fungible personal effects, Highsmith’s novel conceives of the Greenleaf name, and the financial and social privileges that go along with it as a brand of corporate identity, which can be appropriated by another—in this case Tom—without a significant loss to its integrity or ability to generate financial returns. In effect, the Greenleaf corporation, both the family and the shipbuilding firm, is a transient property whose primary purpose is to ensure Ripley the ability to accumulate culture and financial capital without having to bear the significant costs of paying for these acquisitions himself.

2.

In the literary critic Richard Godden’s work regarding the relationship between American fiction and capitalist marketplaces, *Fictions of Capital* (1990), he argues that the increasing concentration of wealth into the hands of a smaller and smaller number of firms and individuals beginning in the 1920s initiated an important shift in capitalism’s mode of production. During the period immediately prior to the advent of what we now regard as the technologies of modern capitalist reproduction—what Godden refers to as “The Age of Reproduction”, which involves simulative commodities
such as those invented by an emergent Hollywood film industry and advertising culture in the 1920s—\textsuperscript{81} the dominant mode of capital was accumulative and centered around the stability of the material object. From an aesthetic standpoint, this was, according to the account given in \textit{Fictions of Capital}, the era of bourgeois novelists such as Henry James, who represented the endurance of social class through depictions of upper-class interiors dense with possessions. Material objects for James, Godden writes, had a solidity and weight that indicated the permanence of class structures and continuity of familial social privilege. The Jamesian way of treating material objects as immutable class indicators accords with the sensibilities of the Greenleaf clan: the green signet ring worn by Dickie that bears his family’s crest is such an indispensable part of his identity that when Marge, Dickie’s erstwhile Italian companion, discovers this ring hidden in Tom’s luggage toward the end of the novel, she assumes that Dickie must be dead. “I just can’t imagine Dickie without his rings,” she exclaims, following Ripley’s dubious explanation of how he came to have his friend’s most prized possession (245).

There is sanctity to the class identity of Greenleaf family embodied in the objects that they own, which extends to the sanctity of the corporate enterprise of Burke-Greenleaf Watercraft, Inc. Although it is unlikely that Richard Greenleaf, or his wayward son Dickie, would have supported the institutional controls advocated by leftwing economists in the midst of the Depression, or would have been in favor of Roosevelt’s First New Deal program of setting production standards on business enterprise through the auspices of the NRA (the National Relief Administration), both the Greenleaf family

and progressives during the interwar period shared an academic orientation toward the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few select institutional entities. On this score, Godden’s interpretation of capitalism misses the larger point: wealth’s concentration in the hands of few through institutional mechanisms of public/private control and the permanence of class through the stability of material possessions share a similar ideological foundation.

With the advent of Keynesian economics, which was less about securing production standards through the management of corporate output, and more committed to allowing markets to flourish under the auspices of normative economic standards—using government spending to precipitate economic growth when the private sector floundered and increasing social spending when necessary—firms could be treated less as necessary fixtures of the national economy, and more as mechanisms for ensuring certain macroeconomic outcomes. While the First New Deal of the 1930s attempted to control the industrial monopolies of private industry to fix production, the Second New Deal—which coincided with the publication of Keynes’s *General Theory*—initiated a round of trust busting in order to break up what Thurman Arnold, Roosevelt’s outspoken Assistant Attorney General in the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department from 1938-1943, aptly called “the bottlenecks of business.”

Within this intellectual climate of the late 1930s, The New Institutional Economics, which began with R.H. Coase’s article on the nature of the firm in 1937, and continued on through the 1940s and 1950s in the economics department of the University of Chicago, sought

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ways to negotiate the transactions between private markets, on the one hand, and the seemingly market-immune operations of firms and business organizations, on the other. To understand why firms, or economic cooperation in general, existed in the first place, economists such as Coase underscored their tangible market benefit.

For Tom Ripley, pretending to be Dickie Greenleaf enables him to travel to Paris and do the things that only a scion of Burke-Greenleaf enterprise would be able to accomplish. Despite all the benefits that accrue to him as Dickie, however, Tom never actually wants to become Dickie, which would mean coming to see the things his dead friend owned as constitutive of his own identity. As he realizes at one crucial point in the narrative, he does not want to possess Dickie’s things, as much as he wants to “anticipate” his possession of Dickie’s things. Arriving at a hotel in Palermo to take up residency in a hotel under the alias of his deceased friend, Tom experiences the peculiar, but nonetheless “pleasant” sensation of this “anticipation.” Touring the city’s local monuments, he reflects “that his anticipation was more pleasant to him than his experiencing. When he spent the evenings alone, handling Dickie’s possessions, simply looking at his rings on his own fingers, or his woolen ties, or his black alligator wallet, was that experiencing or anticipation” (171). Ripley’s attitude toward the possession of Dickie Greenleaf’s material goods, and his desire to ‘anticipate’ rather than own his friend’s things reveals the bipolarity at the center of the novel when it comes to belonging to the Greenleaf family, receiving a stipend from the Burke-Greenleaf expense account, and his wish to engage in more definitively private market activities. “Anticipation” enables Tom to distance himself from identifying too closely as a
Greenleaf, while nonetheless enjoying the distinctive market advantage of being a Greenleaf.

The problem that occurs when Tom stops pretending to be Dickie is that he becomes Dickie, which means, in effect, that he gains Dickie’s appreciation for possessions. Forced by circumstances to stop his masquerade of impersonating his murdered friend—the police and Dickie’s family are, at this point in the narrative, aggressively pursuing his disappearance—Ripley settles, toward the end of the novel, in a “civilized bachelor home” in Venice that he decorates in proper Greenleafian style. Giving “his undivided attention...for more than a week” (203) to selecting the right furniture to suit his new home, Tom begins to acquire a sensibility about what constitutes good taste. It’s not as though he didn’t have good taste before he became Dickie; as he demonstrates early on in the novel, Ripley distinguishes himself from his New York friends by playing up his refined sense of taste and propriety, characterizing those that he knows from the city as “riffraff, vulgarians [and] slobs” in comparison to himself (34). But, with Greenleaf money backing his endeavors, Tom nonetheless experiences, what he describes later in the novel, as a “sureness of taste...that he had not felt” before; decorating his new home in Venice, he feels “surer of himself in...every way” (203). What Ripley finds is that he can treat possessions in a way similar to the Greenleaf family, coming to see them in a Jamesian manner as objects of bourgeois privilege. He admits, finally, that he has come to “love possessions, not masses of them, but [rather] a select few that he did not part with...Possessions reminded him that he existed, and made him enjoy his existence” (236).
Tom’s realization that it “doesn’t take masses of money” to come into the possession of a few choice objects seems an odd admission given the fact that his enjoyment of possessions, at this point in the text, depends entirely on the “masses” of Richard Greenleaf’s money. When Marge first sees the Venetian home where Tom resides, she is confounded by the fact that he can afford not only such a luxurious domicile, but that he also has two servants. Ripley, however, chooses to think of this opulence merely as “security,” which effectively means that, despite the fact that it considerably improves his standard of living, it nonetheless begins to bore him. Tom’s newfound wealth, along with his “sureness of taste,” which gives him a psychic orientation toward possessions similar to that of the Greenleaf family, solves the financial problems he had at the beginning of the novel, and should offer him a measure of relief. But Ripley’s enhanced social and economic position fail, in some crucial way, to keep him from becoming bored. Boredom is the thing that Tom fears most, both at the beginning of the novel and when Highsmith’s work draws towards its conclusion. When he is forced to discontinue his masquerade as Dickie, he feels a profound sadness: he “hated putting on his old set of habits, and feeling that people looked down on him and were bored with him” (181). Similarly, the possessions that he accumulates for his Venetian home confer on him an identity, which is both corporate and familial, of belonging to the Greenleaf clan, although this new identity does not elicit the same excitement and sense of adventure that he felt traveling around Europe pretending to be Dickie; rather, coming into money, serves to make Tom feel “drowsy” and complacent.
In short, for all the benefits of the Greenleaf lifestyle, the thing that doesn’t allow Tom to do, and the thing that he perhaps desires most, is to take risks. “Risks,” as he explains while attempting to elude the police for the murder of Dickie, “were what made the whole thing fun” (171). Tom’s interest in pursuing risky endeavors resonates with a notion of assuming private market risk. Masquerading as Dickie and spending his inheritance checks is fun for Tom because it occurs outside the auspices of an overly rigid corporate infrastructure. Earlier in the novel, Tom engaged in a scheme that occurred within the inflexible organizational structure of a corporate bureaucracy, which was not fun enough because it was not risky enough. Prior to his chance encounter with Richard Greenleaf, Tom pursues a plot that involves his impersonating an IRS agent, sending out “various form” letters from a dingy New York apartment that he sublets “to carefully chosen people...artists and writers and freelance people who had no withholding taxes, and who made from seven to ten thousand a year” (19). The “carefully chosen people” that Tom dupes into sending him checks for underpayment of taxes are those that he characterizes as easy marks; he takes advantage of creative types because they are not quantitatively sophisticated enough, in his estimation, to match his ability for numbers and mathematics. He finds it simple of confuse them by rattling off a series of numerical figures and percentages over the telephone, leaving them confused and disoriented.83 While Tom’s scheme appears to have the potential to generate money, the true financial benefits of his contrivance remain unrealized. Due to

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83 Highsmith also makes an inside joke about one of Tom’s victims, an artist named Frederick Reddington, who as a “comic-book artist” Ripley assumes “probably didn’t know whether he was coming or going” (19). Highsmith worked for a period, prior to her success as a novelist, as a comic-book writer, so she was in a unique position to pass such a judgment on her former colleagues.
the fact that checks are made out to the IRS, Ripley is too “afraid “to actually cash any of them. “Even with a forged letter of authorization,” he reasons, it is simply far too “risky” to cash the checks.

Tom, therefore, gladly gives up this scheme at the first sign that Richard Greenleaf is interested in employing him to travel to Italy and convince his son to return to the United States. This episode suggests that working in an institutional framework, even a contrived institutional framework, such as the IRS does not allow one of pursue risky money-making endeavors. By identifying himself too closely with an organization, despite the fact that his association with this organization is fraudulent, Tom feels hamstrung by it because it does not allow him to assume an adequate level of risk. What Ripley ideally wants to find is a happy medium between risk and security, between participation in private markets and comforts of the Greenleaf family firm, which is also, incidentally, the balance sought by an economist such as Coase. Tom discovers this middle ground within the process of masquerade, which he refers to, on one occasion in the novel as a “serious job.” Tom’s acknowledgement of his profession as an impersonator and the “serious“ work of mimicry appear while he is aboard the ocean liner heading for Europe on Richard Greenleaf’s errand to retrieve his son. Appreciative of fact that the Greenleaf’s have installed him in a first-class cabin, and eager to play the part of a rich young man on European holiday, Ripley experiences the “sudden whim” to purchase a hat; he ends up buying “a conservative bluish-gray cap of soft English wool” from the ship’s haberdashery (37). The pleasure that this hat affords him derives from the fact that it is “the most versatile of headgears”: placing it on his head, he realizes
that he “could look like a country gentleman, a thug, an Englishman, a Frenchman, or a plain American, depending on how he wore it” (Ibid). We already know that Tom is a chameleon when it comes to his identity—Richard Greenleaf’s desire to send him to Europe in the first place is predicated on the fact that believes Ripley possesses the a similar pedigree and runs in the same social circles as his son—and the cap offers further confirmation of his uncanny ability to transform himself into other people. Over the course of his transatlantic voyage, Tom revels in the fact that the ship’s other passengers often mistake him for a “country gentleman” or “a plain American eccentric” (Ibid).

Although Tom values the ‘versatility’ that comes in his masquerading as different people, he also recognizes the importance of his contract with Mr. Greenleaf, and what his employment with Burke-Greenleaf Watercraft demands. For this reason, he eventually decides to settle on playing the part of “a young man with a private income, not long out of Princeton,” which is precisely the persona that he assumes for Richard Greenleaf. Highsmith’s protagonist, in other words, resigns himself to the role of the job that he is hired to played, which undermines, to some extent, the roles that he might play as an economic actor within the consumer marketplace, buying clothes that transform his identity. Taking such an attitude toward his employment in wanting simultaneously to work within the auspices of a corporation, while nonetheless enjoying the freedom of markets is not simply a novelty or a unique personality quirk of Tom Ripley. Nor is it unknown within the annals of postwar culture. Highsmith’s fictional creation shares this predilection in wanting both the security of corporate employment
and the opportunity for unfettered market participation with another iconic 1950s literary character: Tom Rath of Sloane Wilson’s bestselling novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, which was published in the same year as *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

### 3.

William Whyte’s reading of Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, which appears in his aforementioned *The Organization Man*, accuses it of taking a particularly “hypocritical” view of money and the pleasures it affords. “The usual hero of the postwar rash of ‘New York’ novels [of which *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is perhaps the best known example]” Whyte writes, “is overweeningly spiritual” in their attitude toward financial wealth. He finds protagonists such as Rath nauseatingly pharisaic in the “spurious choice” they make between the “good” of morality and the “evil” of material success, and finds the plotline of their “precipitous flight from the bitch goddess of success” in city life to the pastoral settings of the country “where, presumably, [they] find real meaning in life” especially condescending and grating.\(^84\) The primary reason that Whyte finds novels such as Wilson’s “hypocritical” in their rejection of material success, and subsequent embrace of a more spiritual existence, is because the heroes of these works—in his case Tom Rath—do not actually retire to the country to live a life of Thoreau-like deprivation and poverty. Rather, as he rightly points out, these heroes reject mid-century consumerism only to arrive at their new rustic domiciles with “chickens stacked high in the deep freeze” and “a hi-fi set in the stable.”\(^85\) In short, novels such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* do not reject material success at all;

\(^{84}\) Whyte, 250.

\(^{85}\) Ibid, 250.
they only want to be seen as rejecting it. From Whyte’s perspective, these “New York novels” are prime examples of the postwar ethos of having one’s proverbial cake and eating it too.

The interpretation of Sloan Wilson’s novel that appears in *Organization Man* disagrees with the most traditional account of the book, which, as the back cover of the most recent De Capo printing explains, understands it to be a “searing indictment of corporate culture and the enduring power of family.” According to this more conventional account of the novel, the work’s narrative proceeds in order to repudiate the claim made by Tom Rath at the beginning when he rationalizes his career ambitions and pursuit of material success by stating that “when you come right down to it, a man with three children has no damn right to say that money doesn’t matter.” As the story progresses, however, Tom comes to recognize that money indeed does not matter, or, to put the point more subtly, money matters significantly less than other things in his life, such as connecting with his family and reclaiming his emotional and spiritual health. Wilson’s novel ends on a cloying note with Tom leaving his lucrative marketing job in New York to spend more time with his family and enjoy a life of greater ease and leisure.

As Andrew Hoberek points out, however, expanding on Whyte’s critique, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* offers less a rejection of money making as such and a “retreat into family” than it reveals a “fantasy [about] Rath’s unexpected recovery of entrepreneurial status thanks to his grandmother’s bequest of [a piece of] valuable

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86 Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2002), 7. Subsequent quotations from his work will be quoted parenthetically.
Connecticut real estate."\textsuperscript{87} The novel does indeed pivot on the opportunity Tom is presented midway through the narrative to launch a real estate venture by converting the decaying mansion on his grandmother’s former property into a subdivision of middleclass housing. For Hoberek, Rath’s decision to quite his job working for the telecommunications firm UBC and devote his life to private entrepreneurial activity allows him to reclaim his lost status as an independent economic agent. Both Hoberek and Whyte view postwar culture from the lens of its rejection of corporate employment in favor pursuing of economic agency in a free market setting, where producers independently craft commodities for their customers. The difference these two critiques are that Whyte thinks Sloan Wilson does an inadequate job of making this argument the focal point of his novel: from his perspective, Tom Rath is simply too comfortable in his rejection of upper middleclass consumerism.

Hoberek’s argument does, in fact, overstate the case that Tom’s real estate venture offers a repudiation of middleclass values and his former identity as an employee at a large corporate enterprise. After all, Rath’s proposal to repurpose the land of his deceased grandmother’s estate into middleclass housing units seems, if anything, to confirm his commitment to middleclass values. Tom’s plan angers the owners of the large mansions surrounding the property, and it is these individuals, more than Rath himself, who seem to represent the 19\textsuperscript{th}-century model of economic individuality that Hoberek has in mind. Despite this, however, the appeal of the real estate venture for Rath, as he claims several times throughout the novel—and, more

importantly still, what distinguishes it from his job as a speechwriter at UBC, is that it is “interesting.” Rath, like Ripley, has an extreme aversion to boredom. Even if his Connecticut real estate deal turns “into a fiasco,” he reasons, “it will be interesting to see what happens” (163). Compared to his corporate occupation, which “consists of sitting behind a desk all day doing nothing” (164), the real estate venture at least has the virtue of adding some excitement to Rath’s daily life. What appears initially like a critique of mid-century corporate employment, which Wilson’s novel seems to contrast unfavorably with private market adventures of real estate, however, is challenged by the perspective of Rath’s boss, the omnipresent head of UBC, Ralph Hopkins. Although Tom has been ostensibly been hired to write speeches for a charity initiative that Hopkins wants to pursue in the burgeoning field of mental health, UBC’s president has ulterior motives in his hiring of Rath, which he only reveals later in the novel.

Ralph Hopkins is more than simply the President of UBC; as one of Tom’s business contacts reveals when Rath is considering taking a public relations job at the firm early in the novel, Hopkins is the company itself. “After all,” Tom’s friend explains, “Hopkins will always be identified as the president of the United Broadcasting Company” (28). The dilemma is that Hopkins will eventually have to leave UBC and lacks a worthy successor to carry on his legacy after he steps down. He sees Tom Rath as a possible heir to his corporate throne, and thus envisions his speechwriting job as a steppingstone to his eventual rise to the office of the president.88 When Rath uncovers

88 The dilemma that Ralph Hopkins faces as president of UBC is similar to the one that William Paley, the president of CBS, faced in the 1940s. Paley, who had brought CBS, initially a radio broadcast company, back from the brink of bankruptcy in 1928, managed the company with such great success during the
this plan, he feels that he doesn’t desire to step into Hopkin’s oversized shoes, regardless of the social and pecuniary benefits that may be attached to the position for which he is being groomed. As he explains to his wife Betsey, “Hopkins wants to create him in his own image and [he] doesn’t want any part of it” (233). When Tom finally tells Hopkins about his misgivings in becoming his successor, the president is distraught to learn that Rath does not share his passion for the company or the drive and work ethic that it takes to make UBC a success. Admitting to Hopkins that he is unwilling to “bury [himself] in the job every minute of [his] life” (233) in the way that the President has for so many years, Hopkins goes on the defensive, upbraiding his disciple by explaining that “[s]omebody has to do the big jobs” (252; italics original).

Moments later, however, Hopkins relents by extending the logic of his original proposition. He reasons that they can find another role for his speechwriter where he doesn’t need to assume as much responsibility or put in unreasonable hours. “There are plenty of good jobs [at UBC],” he explains, “where it’s not necessary for a man to put in an unusual amount of work” (252). This makes a good deal of sense: for, if “somebody has to do the big jobs,” it would also seem that somebody else would have to do the

1930s and early 1940s that it became difficult for the firm’s shareholders and other employees to imagine CBS existing without Paley at the helm. Much like Hopkins with his plan to launch a charity dedicated to mental health, William Paley also attempted to transition in his later life into the role of a spokesman on social and cultural issues, which lead to the installation of number of proxy presidents in his stead at CBS. Until Frank Stanton finally assumed power in 1946, however, Paley’s succession cast a shadow of uncertainty over the company. (Erik Barnouw, The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States 1933-1953 [New York: Oxford University Press, 1968], 133 – 168. One of the objectives of Wilson’s novel is to elucidate the root of the problem of leadership succession as it pertains to large corporations such as CBS. Hopkins difficulty in finding a person who can lead UBC in his absence stems from the fact that his firm’s corporate identity is so closely associated with his own. As a fellow marketing man tells Tom early in the narrative, “Hopkins will always be identified as the president of United Broadcasting Company” (28), whether or not, it seems, he actively serves as the company’s chief executive.
small jobs. Sloan Wilson’s novel, therefore, at least from the perspective of Ralph Hopkins, does not see Tom’s decision to forgo a “big job” at UBC in order to work on a private real estate venture as a repudiation of corporate employment. Rath, in fact, does not actually quit his corporate job, but rather moves into a position better suited to his personal disposition and predilections. The solution that the President of UBC puts forth that Tom should simply take one of the “good jobs” that doesn’t involve “an unusual amount of work” upholds a model the postwar model of corporate employment—or, perhaps better still, the universal model of corporate employment and infrastructure—in which work is divided among employees according to their particular skill sets and preferences. Whyte’s critique of The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit needs refinement: the novel is not “hypocritical” about material success. The choice between being an employee of a company and instead entering into the market for private real estate ventures is not a choice that the novel forces readers to make. Insofar as Ralph Hopkins, and by extension Sloan Wilson sees it, Tom Rath can do both: he can keep his corporate identity with UBC, while nonetheless heading out into the uncharted waters of the private market.

The similarities between Sloan’s novel and The Talented Mr. Ripley should be clear enough: both works are interested in the relationship between postwar employment in a corporate context that can coincide with participation, as individuals, in the private market. The solution that these fictions come up with, namely that economic cooperation of an organizational or corporate kind, should not necessarily be seen as hostile to private market activity offer a counterargument to the “organization
man” crisis introduced by social critics such as William Whyte. As the economist R.H. Coase showed, following the insights of Keynes that institutional structures actually improved and lent support to the operations of the private market, firms possess certain benefits that individual economic agents do not, and hardly contradict the main emphasis of economic activity in the first place, which is to make markets operate more efficiently. Both Tom Rath and Tom Ripley understand that belonging to a corporation does not prohibit one from enjoying the freedoms of the market.

4.

The second installment of Highsmith’s Ripley series, *Ripley Under Ground* (1970), further reinforces the notion that corporate identity and private market activity are not opposed to one another. In fact, it goes one major step forward in suggesting that corporate identity and individual market activity are identical to each other. When Tom’s story picks up fifteen years later, after it has left him entering the island of Crete with Dickie’s financial fortune now firmly in his possession, he is married and living in a French villa nicknamed “Belle Ombre” (‘beautiful shade’) in the midst of perpetrating a “large” and “lucrative” art fraud. In the ensuing years, Ripley has become involved in the art world, which is something he indicates that he would enjoy in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, but his primary role in this arena is neither as a collector nor as a patron of promising young artists as he initially intended. Instead, Tom has, with the assistance of two London art dealers who own an English gallery called the Buckmaster and a painter named Bernard Tufts, created a market for the forged works of a dead artist named

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Derwatt. Although relatively unknown, and thoroughly unappreciated, during his lifetime, Derwatt’s assumed disappearance (he has actually committed suicide) and “the legend of his tragic death has helped, instead of hindered,” the value of his art (22). Promoted in art magazines by journalists, and sold through the Buckmaster Gallery, Derwatt’s posthumous works draw increasingly large sums of money. Eventually, however, “the inevitable” happens, and all the remaining Derwatt paintings have all been sold, which means that the profits of the dealers of the Buckmaster Gallery from these paintings disappear as well. Fortunately for these art dealers, shortly after the last of Derwatt’s paintings has been sold, they have a chance encounter with Tom Ripley, who is living in London at the time. Sensing an opportunity, Tom suggests that the men begin to forge Derwatt paintings to pass off as originals. What begins as a half-hearted experiment to see if Bernard Tufts can produce accurate enough forgeries to dupe art collectors grows into a large corporate enterprise, Derwatt Ltd., which eventually produces a line of Derwatt-brand art supplies and even a Derwatt school of art.

Derwatt Ltd. provides Tom with a small, but consistent profit, which is threatened when an American art collector named Thomas Murchison questions the authenticity of a forged Derwatt painting that he purchased through the Buckmaster Gallery some months before the novel begins. As Jeff Constant, one of the English art dealers, explains to Tom in a letter, Murchison’s suspicions that the work he owns, a piece entitled The Clock, may not be a genuine Derwatt is due to inconsistencies he observes in the paint color. In order to placate Murchison’s doubts about Derwatt’s “genuineness,” Ripley flies to London and impersonates the dead painter, meeting with
the American to ensure him of his painting’s authenticity. Murchison, however, remains dubious and explains the reasons for his suspicions about the originality of the Derwatt he owns. Over drinks in a London bar, the American art collector tells Tom, who has now reassumed his actual identity, that *The Clock*, which was actually painted by Bernard Tufts, uses a “mixture of ultramarine and cadmium red” that the actual Derwatt had discarded from his color palette six years before the supposed date of Murchison’s painting. The theory that he offers to Ripley is that a painter never reuses a color “that he has unconsciously discarded. I say unconsciously” he continues, “because when a painter chooses a new color or colors it is usually a decision made by his unconscious” (52). The theory that Murchison offers in this instance regarding the “unconscious” display of an artist’s preference for certain colors invokes the theory of the well-known postwar art critic, Harold Rosenberg, who argued, in an essay first published in 1952, that modern painting was an expression of the inner content of an artist’s unconscious mind put on display for the spectator.90

Fearing that art was becoming too institutionalized—a matter of what so-called experts or critics thought of the quality of a particular artist, which he referred to as the “Balkanization of the professions” in art—Rosenberg praised abstract expressionism for its idiosyncratic and unconscious style, which embodied a way of speaking directly to its audience. For Murchison, “[a]n artist’s style is his truth, his honesty” and no man has “the right to copy [an artist’s particular style] in the same way that a man copies another’s signature” (71). Rosenberg, similarly, was particularly concerned by the idea

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that an artist’s “signature” style could be replicated and identity forged, which was especially a problem for high modernist painters such as Jackson Pollock’s whose art lends itself so easily to mimicry by even mediocre forgers.\textsuperscript{91} From Tom Ripley’s perspective, however, Derwatt is nothing more than a signature, a marker of institutionalized or corporate identity, a brand for generating profit. He is Andy Warhol to Murchison’s Pollock. The “self-organizing system” of the postwar art world, to return to Mark Seltzer’s formulation, is what creative invention is about for him. Ripley actually prefers the fake Derwatt paintings to their authentic counterparts because they confirm that it is the corporate entity of Derwatt Ltd. that needs to be saved, rather than the creative “honesty” of some dead artist.

At the same time, however, Tom is less interested in saving Derwatt Ltd., as an ongoing corporate concern than he is in saving himself. When all else fails, and he finds himself unable to convince Murchison that his painting is an authentic Derwatt, he decides to expose his scheme to the American collector. Murchison threatens to reveal this secret to the rest of the world, so Tom decides to murder him as he did Dickie. After he has killed Murchison, Ripley’s reveals his true motivation behind the crime: he realizes that “[h]e wouldn’t have killed someone just to save Derwatt Ltd., or even Bernard. Tom had killed Murchison because Murchison had realized that he [Tom] had impersonated Derwatt” (94). Written in the early 1970s, in a post-Nixon America, where the security offered both by the state and private corporate institutions was gradually eroding, Tom recognizes, quite accurately, that he doesn’t owe anything to the company

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid, 65.
from which he derives an income, but rather must work to protect himself. In comparison to the 1950s, when the idea was to seek a middle ground between secure and stable employment and entering the private market to enhance one’s financial balance sheet, by the early 1970s, *Ripley Under Ground* understands that what individuals need to protect are their skills—in this case, Tom’s talent for masquerade—which is all he has to offer on the free market of neoliberal economies. No longer a professional, *Ripley Under Ground*, portrays Ripley as a private contractor, selling his skills to highest bidder and protecting his own personal assets through the necessary art of murder.
A Monetary History of Yoknapatawpha County

1.

At the conclusion of The Mansion (1959), the third and last book in William Faulkner’s Snopes trilogy, the narrator eulogizes one of Yoknapatawpha County’s most infamous residents, the banker Flem Snopes. Flem’s murder at the hands of his vengeful cousin, Mink, solidifies his legacy as a man who had no friends and no “ auspices: fraternal, civic or military: only finance, not any economy—cotton or cattle or anything else Yoknapatawpha County and Mississippi were kept running by.” In the end, the unnamed narrator explains, “Flem belonged simply [and entirely] to money” (706). This final appraisal of the banker’s impact on Faulkner’s fictional community repeats what readers of the trilogy already know: that Flem’s activity was, first and foremost, geared toward his turning an economic profit. When he initially arrives in Frenchmen’s Bend at the beginning of The Hamlet (1940), he starts his slow ascent to the top of Jefferson’s economic and social hierarchy by first securing a job as a clerk in Jody Varner’s country store. Once installed as this position, Flem commences his financial machinations; as a local sewing-machine salesman, and self-appointed conscience of Jefferson, V.K. Ratliff, recognizes, early on, the key fact about Flem is that he “never made mistakes in any matter pertaining to money.” Various critics of the Snopes novels have underscored Faulkner’s anxiety about the financial outlook that Flem introduces to Yoknapatawpha

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92 William Faulkner, The Mansion (New York: The Library of America, 1999), 706. Subsequent citations from his work will be listed parenthetically.
County.\textsuperscript{94} As Richard Godden rightly points out, however, Flem should be read as more than “the agent of something as generic as capital.”\textsuperscript{95} To this point, Godden argues that Flem’s refusal to extend credit to the farmers who frequent Jody Varner’s store to purchase various farm implements and grain for their harvests, offers a critique of the exploitative regime of Southern sharecropping, thus revealing the leftwing and populist tendencies of Faulkner’s later fiction.\textsuperscript{96}

My essay, in turn, seeks to build on Godden’s fundamental insight about the complex and nuanced historical resonances that Faulkner’s portrayal of markets and other economic institutions in his Snopes trilogy present. The market that Flem represents in these novels exists in tension to the other market forms: those markets that, in the words of \textit{The Mansion}, “Yoknapatawpha County and Mississippi were kept running by.” Focusing on the two Snopes works written at the end of the 1950s, I argue that Faulkner responds to issues pertinent to the postwar economy, in particular to the matter of using monetary policy to expand credit and ensure adequate levels of consumer purchasing power, through his staging of the battle between the economy of Flem and that of the other characters in the novel. The economic theories that provide the subtext for both \textit{The Town} (1957) and \textit{The Mansion} situate Faulkner within a body of

\textsuperscript{94} According to the critic Mauri Skinfill, Faulkner’s purpose in drawing Flem as a purely market animal is to “insist on the difference between economic and cultural forms of social mobility,” invariably validating cultural wealth as the better achievement of the two. (“The American Interior: Identity and Commercial Culture in Faulkner’s Late Novels” from \textit{The Faulkner Journal} Fall, 2005, 140). In a similar vein, the critic Joseph Urgo offers theological values as an alternative to the Snopesian economy, while Richard Moreland interprets Faulkner’s negative views on capitalism and the market through the lens of race. (Joseph Urgo, \textit{Faulkner’s Apocrypha}. Oxford: The University of Mississippi Press, 1989, 180; and Richard Moreland, \textit{Faulkner and Modernism Rereading and Rewriting}, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).


\textsuperscript{96} Ibid, 21.
intellectual thought and discourse about the postwar market that would later come to be formalized by the economist Milton Friedman in his groundbreaking history of American business cycles, *A Monetary History of the United States*, published in 1963. Friedman’s central argument that the stock or amount of money in the economy at any given time determined its economic potency drew on the recent debates of the 1950s regarding the use of monetary policy tools as a mechanism for ensuring continued growth in the immediate aftermath of America’s economic expansion. Faulkner’s Flem extraction of money from the economy of Yoknapatawpha County in order to replenish his private savings hoard takes place in the context of an ongoing discussion, conducted throughout the postwar years, about the role of national currency and financial credit in the economy of the United States.

In what follows, I seek to describe how a commitment to using monetary policy to prop up fledging economies, which functioned as an alternative to more aggressive federal spending policies of traditional Keynesian theory, arrived in the late 1950s and provided the basis for Faulkner’s portrayal of the economy of Jefferson, Mississippi. Although monetarists offered a different prescription for managing the American economy than traditional Keynesianism, both Keynesian fiscal policy and monetary theory held a view that markets naturally tended toward disequilibrium—and that, moreover, financial imbalances were the cause of this disequilibrium, which is what Keynes sought to explain in his theory of liquidity preference—and that active economic management was required to restore macroeconomic order. In the case of the monetary economists like Friedman, increasing or decreasing the money stock played a
corrective role in establishing equilibrium in ways similar to Keynesian fiscal measures. For Friedman, depressed conditions argued for the need to create a monetary surplus that would drive production and expand economic opportunities. From Faulkner’s perspective similarly, the poverty of the South and its seemingly natural state of economic depression led him to take a rather bullish stance toward the expansion of the money supply in his fiction. In both of his later Snopes novels, and particularly *The Mansion*, Faulkner consistently advocates for enlarging the money stock and growing the credit market. This surplus-minded approach to economy also provided the basis for theories regarding aesthetics and culture that he developed in his later career. As America’s best known modernist author and an increasingly commercially-successful novelist during the 1950s, he became interested in the cultural criticism surrounding abstract expressionist painting, particularly the work of Harold Rosenberg and his thinking about artistic brand identity. The second part of this chapter will be about how brand names, in Faulkner’s later novels, come to be seen as engines for generating monetary surplus, and thus economically useful as a means of counteracting the downward trajectory of depressions.

It is crucial to acknowledge that with Faulkner’s reliance on monetarist frameworks to expand the economic wellbeing of his region, the aesthetic project that I have been describing of a Keynesian postwar modernism becomes somewhat nugatory. Faulkner is, unsurprisingly, the most conservative of the novelists in this present volume and the ideas regarding political economy that appear in his later fiction are the least progressive of any of the writers featured in this work. The latter two Snopes novels
anticipate the development of what would come later, in the 1960s and 1970s, to be called “The Sunbelt South,” which historian Matthew Lassiter describes as a “pragmatic” agenda of exchanging typical Southern identity, rooted in racial animus, for government spending and increased capital investment.\footnote{Matthew Lassiter, \textit{The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South} (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2006), 11.} The loss of black laborers, who become bystanders in denuded urban localities, stripped of industry, while white Southerners “retrenched” in suburbs around influxes of capital, remade Southern society and its race relations in fundamental ways. One of the most interesting aspects of the later Faulkner novels is their paucity of African American characters. For an author so invested in the penetration of black and white bodies—politically, socially, sexually and economically—the relative disappearance of African Americans in \textit{The Town} and \textit{The Mansion} makes for a curious elision, but one that can be easily explained by the future trajectory in the South of the 1950s and 60s. The appearance of money in the “Sunbelt South” coincided with the disappearance of blacks, done under the auspices of progress, from the terrain of the white suburbs: an explicit political Jim Crow was replaced by a tacit and implicit economic segregation of the races.

Due to this identity as a Southern novelist, moreover, it makes sense that Faulkner would be rigorously engaged in seriously considering matters of money and credit. After all, Southern history was deeply implicated in the introduction of a federal currency following the Civil War. Although various regional banks had been issuing stock certificates that functioned as a kind of money since the early 19th century, it wasn’t until the issuance of greenbacks by the federal government to pay for the war that the
United States established a genuine national currency. The legacy of money, then, is also a legacy of Southern defeat and capitulation to the norms of Northern capitalism. The retirement of greenbacks and the reestablishment of the gold standard in the 1870s cut both ways for the denizens of Faulkner’s region: on the one hand, Southerners would be inclined to view greenback currency negatively as the means by which the Northern armies were able to spend them into defeat; on the other hand, reducing the monetary supply had drastic implications for a region that was cash poor and in dire need to new investment opportunities. In his foundational account of the postbellum South, *The Origins of a New South*, published in 1951, C. Vann Woodward attempts to understand how the South’s poverty, the restrictiveness of its capital and its particular class arrangements and affiliations helped to define its distinctive social character. Woodward argues that the South’s isolation from Northern markets and the ease with which its aristocratic classes were able to exploit a supple labor force were the driving forces behind its seeming social backwardness. Behind its racism and reactionary politics, the South’s defining feature was the feudal economic structure that it maintained in defiance of Northern capital markets, which came as the result of its inability to lay claim to substantial amounts of financial capital.

As the historian Barrington Moore Jr. explains, “the ultimate causes” of the American Civil War “are to be found in the growth of different economic systems.”

Slavery was an economically profitable system for the limited number of those who

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owned slaves, but it was also a system that ran against the main ideological currents of Northern capitalism. The “principles of agrarian democracy,” Moore argues, had “a tendency to favor debtors over creditors” because the indebted farm was seen, from the South’s ideological perspective, as the backbone of American free-market capitalism. The abolition of slavery gave freedom to African Americans, but the Civil War did little to change the economic and social structure of the South from a system of feudal agrarianism to a system of capitalist markets. The presidency of Andrew Johnson and the relaxation of the North’s commitment to radically remaking the South, in fact, saw the reinstallation of feudalism in the form of the institution of sharecropping. Implemented in the aftermath of the breakup of the plantation system, sharecropping allowed the South’s white aristocracy to turn both the recently emancipated black slaves and poor landless whites into a contingent of disenfranchised peons under the cover of a supposedly free-market system of wage labor. Instead of introducing a vibrant capital market based on the model offered by the North, sharecropping reestablished peasantry as the dominant economic structure in vast swatches of territory throughout the Mississippi Delta and Black Belt.

W.J. Cash argues that, during the decades following the Civil War “there arose in the South the white tenant and white cropper,” the latter of whom joined “a mighty and always multiplying horde of the landless, who, in order to eat, must turn to laboring for their neighbors on whatever terms they offered.” This “horde of landless” white laborers comprised the political base of the agrarian Populist Party, which came into

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100 Ibid, 116.
power in the 1880s and 1890s to combat the political might of the white plantocracy and the institution of sharecropping. The history of agrarian populism in the South, however, offers a fraught legacy: although it initially offered the promise of political franchise to its constituency of poor farmers, it very soon became co-opted by economic charlatans and racist elements. In its earliest manifestations, as Woodward describes, the Populist Party established a biracial base of support, making economic exploitation at the hands of the white landlord class its chief political complaint. Although due to a concerted effort on the part of the South’s powerful classes to dilute the potency of the populism’s membership and appeal, this biracial constituency gradually eroded. White populists in the early part of the 20th century, and throughout the 1910s and 1920s, came to view their own economic power and social status in opposition to the region’s black labor force. Woodward’s account shows how the racial progressivism of white rural politics in the 1880s became distorted by the perception, advanced by the success of the plantocracy in securing black support in the area of the Black Belt, that African American political interests were opposed to their own. 102 By the 1920s, white rural progressivism in the South had come to reside in groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, who were committed to racial terror and violence on an unprecedented scale. Often the exact same political figures that made their early careers fighting against the white power structure of Southern landlords were those that later became the most adamant race baiters. James K Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo, for example, both of whom served

as governors of Mississippi and were impassioned white supremacists, began their respective political careers as opponents of the South’s white aristocracy.\(^{103}\)

Although such a legacy of racism would not seem to recommend Flem Snopes brand of populism, Faulkner’s own stance on racial matters during the postwar period, when he made several outlandish and impolitic comments regarding black equality, would not, regrettably, preclude his embrace of at least some of the features of later race-baiting populism. What he did clearly oppose, however, was the version of economy advanced by the later bimetallist arm of the Populist Party. Richard Hofstadter’s famous account of this group in the mid-1950s shows how the myopic focus on promoting the issuance of silver coinage displaced the reformist trajectory of the early people’s parties. William Jennings Bryan’s ascension to the top of the Democratic ticket in 1896 ensured the co-option of populist forces by a reactionary political power based around the interests of silver mining interests in the West.\(^{104}\)

Bryan and his supporters accused Eastern interests of holding onto a single metallic currency standard (gold) simply in order to maintain their power over the Western farmer, and, by virtue of some vague associative principle, the poor whites in the Southern states. In truth, neither the so-called “gold bugs” of the East nor the free-silver

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\(^{103}\) Ibid.

\(^{104}\) Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform* (New York: Random House Books, 1955), a critique of populist political movements in the U.S., argues that the focus on bimetallism undermined the reformist ethos of the People’s Party in the 1890s. The free silver movement had “lavish funds at its disposal” and “subsidized editors, politicians, and pamphleteers,” in spreading the “notion that all of the country’s basic ills could be cured by the single expedient of free coinage of silver” (106). “The problem confronting the People’s Party leaders [in the 1890s]” Hofstadter continues, “was whether to fight this effort of the silver forces to impose a single issue upon the reform movement or to go along with it and join the silver chorus. To accept silver meant to soft-pedal the other issues, not only because the dynamic of the free-silver panacea tended to displace them but also because accepting silver meant reaching out for conservative support (like that of the silver-mine owners) that frowned on other Populist issues” (Ibid).
proponents of the West and South were correct in their assessment of the problem confronting the American economy in the late 19th century. As Milton Friedman showed in 1963, a basic understanding of principles of monetary policy and commitment to an inflationist currency in the decades following the Civil War would have gone a long way in supporting the real rise in output that occurred over the decades of the 1870s and 1880s. The dilemma only superficially revolved around the minting of silver and the creation of dual metallic standard for U.S. currency: the heart of the matter was that money and credit were in drastically short supply in the South’s agrarian economy.

Faulkner’s Mississippi, as he represents its evolution over the course of the Snopes trilogy, must be understood in light of this central problem within the Southern economy. Godden’s reading of Flem’s “residual” populism implies a particular historical legacy that cannot be fully apprehended by merely suggesting that Faulkner’s later fiction depends on his commitment to class equality and his rejection of the credit markets that subtended the economy of sharecropping. The underlying radical ethos of Flem Snopes, as it first appears in The Hamlet, must also be seen for the way it reduces the supply of money circulating in Yoknapatawpha County. The anti-market forces that Flem unleashes when he assumes the post of clerk at Jody Varner’s country store simultaneously entail an opposition to sharecropping and a reactionary stance toward market forms. At first glance, it might appear as though Flem’s refusal to extend credit to the farmers who frequent Varner’s store works to their benefit by ensuring that they will not be caught in a cycle of endless debt. As Godden himself recognizes, however, not all of the characters in The Hamlet are exploited by the debt cycle of sharecropping.
to the same degree; some, in fact, like the sewing-machine salesman V.K. Ratliff, require credit in order to make their livelihood. Godden argues that Ratliff’s “mercantile judgments are marked by” his being bound to the “coercive-led credit regime”\(^{105}\), thus suggesting that his negative assessment of Flem’s radical alternative to credit is problematically influenced by his own reliance on the exploitative mechanisms of sharecropping. Although Ratliff is ostensibly an “independent trader,” Godden writes that in “selling sewing machines typically on credit” Ratliff “depends upon and validates those structures of debt emanating from Varner’s store and Varner’s rented fields.”\(^{106}\)

Ratliff’s dependence on the economy of Varner, however, goes beyond the benefits he accrues by offering farmers sewing machines on credit. The merchant’s business relies on a bountiful cotton harvest as much as the sharecroppers to whom he sells his machines. Faulkner establishes the fact that Ratliff must wait for the “money in the land” to bloom before he is able to pay back his wholesaler, and his greatest anxiety as a businessman is that this wholesaler will “demand” payment for his “outstanding notes” before he can collect money from his customers.\(^{107}\) Rather than reading Ratliff as a proxy for Varner then, it is more accurate to say that he embodies the role of both creditor and debtor in order to underscore the problem that Flem’s credit denial poses to the market of Yoknapatawpha County. It is difficult to see, moreover, what political objective Flem’s tightness with credit, pragmatically speaking, serves beyond appropriating funds that would otherwise be used for productive ends such as raising a

\(^{105}\) Godden, 24.
\(^{106}\) Ibid.
\(^{107}\) Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, 781.
cotton harvest or investing in sewing machines—notwithstanding the exploitation that these economic activities inevitably entailed within the system of Southern sharecropping—and redirecting them into his own pockets. As readers come to understand, and as Flem’s first occupation as a clerk in Jody Varner’s store indeed indicates, Snopes business enterprises imperil the existence of money, thus threatening the macroeconomic health of the community in which he resides. The ventures of Flem and his relatives contract the money supply in two ways: either by consuming financial surpluses within the transactions that they perform or by extracting currency from the economy to increase their own financial hoard. Neither of these two alternatives suggests a radical liberal departure from sharecropping and a critique of its exploitative elements, but rather instead, merely introduces a more novel means of exploiting the Southern body politic.

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In *The Town*, published 17 years after *The Hamlet*, it is the capacity to consume financial surpluses that Faulkner highlights in his depiction of one of Flem’s relative and the pornographic picture business that he creates. When Montgomery Ward Snopes, introduces a pornographic slideshow theatre in Jefferson, he succeeds in offending the moral sensibilities of the town’s more conservative denizens—Ratliff included—although the threat of Montgomery Ward’s theatre involves both the social licentiousness it enables, as well as the structure of its business and financial operations. Ratliff compares Montgomery Ward’s theatre to the canteen the latter ran while serving in France during WWII: “The French probably thought the kind of canteen that
Montgomery Ward was running,” he explains, “about the most solvent and economical and self-perpetuating kind of thing he could have picked out.” What makes the canteen so “solvent,” by Ratliff’s account, is that the foodstuffs that are sold, “the ice cream and chocolate candy and sody pop” (102), seem to replenish themselves, without Montgomery Ward appearing to have to collect any money for the goods that he sells. The canteen, however, only has the appearance of a cashless business. At least “some of money” made by the canteen, Ratliff reveals, goes back into the business in the form of an investment to “produce and replenish” the products consumed by his customers. In the case of the pornographic theatre, however, nothing needs to be replenished, and the business can be viewed as generating zero financial profit or extra surplus. Montgomery Ward’s “stock in trade,” Faulkner maintains, “was of such a nebulous quality that it never had no existence except during the moment when the customer was actively buying and consuming it” (383).

Montgomery Ward sells products (pornographic pictures) whose production also implies their immediate consumption. Such an economic model is based on the formulation of equilibrium and operates according to the dictates of Say’s Law, which describes an economy in which goods produced are essentially exchanged for other goods. Prior to the Keynesian revolution, when the English economist introduced the possibility that money could create a misalignment between the production of goods and their consumption, this notion of the economy based on the concept of barter, in which goods were produced and immediately consumed, operated as the paradigm of

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108 William Faulkner, *The Town* (New York: The Library of America, 1999), 102. Subsequent citations from his work will be listed parenthetically.
market efficiency. In Ward Snopes theatre, by denying the transactional role of money, the very commodities he sells take on an intangible and unreal quality. Faulkner associates the class of goods that Montgomery Ward sells in his theatre with another aspect of commodities in postwar consumer culture: the changes in advertising and the increased visibility of Madison Avenue during the postwar years altered the way that commodities appeared in the market during the 1950s. The social critic Vance Packard’s book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, published in the same year as Faulkner’s novel, criticized the burgeoning American ad industry for its willful psychological manipulation of consumers. Packard argued that Madison Avenue’s use of consumer market research proved its intention of subliminally motivating purchasers with coded messages that had little to do with the inherent virtues of the products they sold.\(^{109}\) This fetishization of consumer goods appears, in Faulkner’s postwar fiction, as a kind of denial of economic transactions themselves. Such a viewpoint, upon closer examination, does not seem as outlandish as it might first intuitively appear: the ethos of modern advertising, after all, approaches products not as economic entities in the sense of possessing monetary worth, but as things that coextensive with one’s lifestyle, and, therefore, not economic entities at all, but rather as things that speak to one’s social status and consumer identity. In conventional Marxist analysis, commodities are entities that displace the labor value of their production with something like commercial value. Although for Faulkner, at least in the 1950s, labor value seems beside the point: what advertised commodities in the postwar don’t enable is the appearance of money, as an entity.

distinct, separable, and in excess, of the commodity itself. (Faulkner takes a similar tack to Ellison in drawing out the distinction between money and commodities, but for entirely opposite ends: for Faulkner, consumption that neglects money is rootless and status-driven consumerism for the sake to consumerism, and thus comes to be treated as a negative).

For Flem Snopes, the value of commercial goods does not depend on their underlying monetary value, but rather the status they afford him. When he finally attains the position of Vice President on the Bank of Jefferson, he decides to refurnish his home in a manner and style more befitting his current occupation. As Eula, Flem’s wife, explains to the disbelieving Gavin Stevens, her husband’s selection of furniture does not take into account either the prevailing styles of home décor, nor is he interested in its expense. She tells Stevens that the furniture simply “had to be exactly what it was, for exactly what he was” (195). The notion that furniture exists that “exactly” conforms to “what [Flem] was” underscores the triumph of a model of consumerism that doesn’t sell commodities in the traditional sense of an economic exchange, but rather envisions commercial goods to be extensive with the identities of those who acquire them. Looking at Flem’s living room, Gavin Stevens immediately recognizes where he has seen the room before: “In a photograph, the photograph from say Town and Country labelled [sic] American Interior, reproduced in color in a wholesale furniture catalogue, with the added legend: This is neither a Copy or a Reproduction. This is our own Model scaled to your individual requirements” (194; italics original). If Faulkner intends this to be a moment in which readers are encouraged to
question Flem’s mass consumer tastes, the living room provides a curious example of mass commercial culture in the postwar period. Although the room is modeled after a photograph from *Town and Country*, it is, according to its legend, explicitly not a “copy or a reproduction,” but rather advertises home furnishings that perfectly fit Flem’s own “individual requirements.” The furniture that the banker buys, in other words, are not mass produced and infinitely reproducible. Instead, they are entirely idiosyncratic to his tastes and needs, which is why they needn’t be, or even in fact look, “expensive” (195). Idiosyncratic expressiveness, rather than expensive, functions as a way to understand the commercial goods and products of the postwar period distinct and different from any independent and objective monetary standard.

The issue with Flem’s consumption habits is that insofar as he buys whatever is produced for him, the price or value of the goods he acquires never need to be taken into account. His peculiar consumer practices, which deny the existence of money as a transactional medium, are the flip side of his penury when it comes to the way he uses money in his capacity as a banker. Flem, in his insistence on strict accounting practices, understands the role of banks not as instruments of investment, but as, essentially, storehouses for money. “His idea or concept of bank,” Gavin Stevens relates, “was that of an Elizabethan tavern or a frontier…you stopped there before dark for shelter from the wilderness…[and] if you woke up the next morning with your purse rifled or your horse stolen or even your throat cut, you had no one to blame but yourself” (230). In his misconception that banks are under more or less constant threat of being looted by thieves, Flem focuses on “amassing” money within the vaults of his bank, “believing as
he did that money itself, cash dollars, possessed an inherent life of its mutual own like cells or disease” (234). His fetishizing of money, in turn, causes him to become a miser, penuriously opposed to lending his money to support any project or economy that Jefferson “may be kept running by” (706). Flem’s retail banking customers consist of the poor white farmers who subsist on the fringes of Jefferson society. Relying on the deposits of such a constituency causes Flem to fail initially in his attempt to wrest power away from the bank president Manfred De Spain because, as the novel notes, this “one-gallused [sic] one-bale residuum which, if all their resources, including the price of their second-hand overalls, could have been pooled, the result would not have shaken the economy of a country church, let alone a country-seat bank” (249). Although the eventual success of his bank ultimately depends on his blackmailing De Spain for the affair that the president has with his wife Eula, Flem’s courting of these farmers makes an important point about his underlying financial philosophy. Preferring the “thin laborious sums” and the “meagre [sic] individual dollars” (247) of these poor farmers over the large accounts of the other denizens of Yokanapatawpha, he establishes himself as less of a banker, conforming to the norms and expectations of this profession in the practice of lending money and making investments, and more of a consummate saver, extracting money from the economy to order to replenish his personal hoard.

While Flem builds his banking empire “picayune nickel by nickel” (231) he finds a worthy adversary in a younger Snopes, the son of his cousin Eck Snopes, Wallstreet Panic Snopes, who introduces an entirely different concept of financial economy into Faulkner’s fictional community. Ratliff describes Wallstreet Panic Snopes as a “non-
Snopes son” who sets out to construct a chain of grocery stores throughout the South, employing methods of “simple and honest industry” (129). Wallstreet Panic, who eventually changes his name to just Wall when he realizes what Wallstreet Panic means, builds “the first self-service grocery store that [Jefferson] had ever seen, built on the pattern which the big chain grocery stores were to make nation-wide in the purveying of food” (131). His grocery business has one important virtue over Flem’s financial operations: it generates a profit and makes money available. Constructing a large parking lot near his store, Wall encourages the female shoppers of Jefferson to “come to town and seek his bargains and carry them home themselves” (Ibid). Both Wall and his customers, Ratliff explains to Gavin Stevens, had “found money” (Ibid), and it is this discovery of transactional exchange that involves money that most recommends this chain grocery from the perspective of the characters in Faulkner’s novel.

Faulkner views the primary function of Wall’s grocery business to revolve around its ability to secure a reliable source of money. Ratliff explains to Gavin Stevens, Wall’s “credit is too good with the big wholesalers” for Flem’s bank to challenge the financial profits of his enterprise (132). Taken together, Flem’s penury and Wall’s expansion of the mechanisms of credit speak to centrality of money in the economy that sustains

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110 The “big chain grocery stores” that Faulkner undoubtedly has in mind is the corporate monolith A & P, which produced the model for the big box retail store that we know today in companies such as Walmart. In his recent history of A & P grocery store, Marc Levinson shows how George and John Hartman, the owners of the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company “transformed both the nature of retailing and the expectations of the American shopper” through restructuring their company “onto a dramatically new course...that sought growth and profitability by emphasizing low costs, low prices and high volume.” (The Great A & P and the Struggle for Small Business in America (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011, 96). The Hartman’s realized that if they maintained a high volume of wholesale products that could quickly be turned over in their grocery stores, they could still make money even if they greatly reduced the profit they made from any one individual sale.
Yoknapatawpha County. Flem’s commitment to restricting capital and credit flows so that he can hold onto dollars represents an ambition opposite to the emerging commitment, on the part of America’s economic managers, to offer an expansive monetary policy as a method for ensuring the continued growth of the national economy in the late 1950s. Milton Friedman, in particular, is a crucial figure in rethinking the importance of money and its impact on the macroeconomy. In the middle and late 1950s, Franco Modigliani, a neo-Keynesian economist looked at the impact that the rate of money had on production and consumption behaviors. “According to Modigliani,” writes the financial historian Perry Mehrling, having “the right monetary policy can induce the level of spending required for full employment. The right monetary policy means either picking the right quantity of money or picking the right rate of interest.” The “right quantity of money” and the “right rate of interest” from Faulkner’s standpoint, in facing a region’s whose economy had been depressed for nearly its entire history, would have been higher than what would have been the case for other, more economically vibrant, economies. Written in 1963, Friedman’s monetary history would retroactively provide a theoretical justification for why Wall Snopes needed to pay lower interest rates than his Northern counterparts.

Beginning at the end of the Civil War, Friedman tracked how the supply of money often failed to keep up with economic output and growth, which caused a price decline and could have been avoided simply by increasing agents’ access to liquid capital. Writing about the 1870s, which were times of enormous economic stress, a

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“supposed contraction” of markets was accompanied, oddly enough, by a “rate of growth of nearly 9 percent per year.”112 The “major conclusion” that Friedman draws from looking at the economic data from the 1870s is that “an unusually rapid rise in output converted an unusually slow rate in the rise of the stock of money into a rapid decline in prices.”113 The contraction during this period according to Friedman, in other words, was not a result of failure of production—or, as proponents of Keynes would have it, a failure of consumption to encourage an increase an production—but rather the failure to ensure that there was enough money to support prices in the midst of a “rapid” expansion of production. It is in the light of this argument concerning the deprivation of the money stock as the cause of depressions that Flem’s contraction of Jefferson’s money supply needs to be viewed. From the standpoint of both his consumer habits, which denies the presence of money by articulating a version of economy as existing in equilibrium, and from the perspective of his credit denial as a banker, Flem rejects the model of economic growth that supports the need to produce monetary surpluses, which was precisely the model upheld by the theorists of monetary economics in the postwar period. Faulkner’s focus on how Flem’s penurious habits as a banker undermine the community of Jefferson should be viewed in light of his aggressiveness in limiting the amount of money in circulation within Yoknapatawpha County.

113 Ibid
Flem’s reluctance to supply Yoknapatawpha County with monetary capital, along with his consumer habits, prevents the commercial goods that he acquires from playing a role in creating monetary surpluses that will lead to acquisition of more goods, and thus grow, rather than contract, the economy. Although the banker buys many goods throughout the course of these novels, in the end, he never actually uses any of them. Ratliff depicts Flem, on two separate occasions, as “chewing air,” which highlights the ephemeral nature of the things that he buys. Due to the fact that his purchases are immediately ingested, and can never be recognized as having a value separable, and independent, from their consumption, they have a tendency to simply disappear. For Faulkner, however, commercial goods only become important when they achieve a value independent of their status as commodities—different, that is, from their propensity to be consumed or eaten. This value, as it appears in *The Mansion*, attaches itself to the commercial object’s brand identity, which exists as a value in excess, in pecuniary terms, of the good’s use value. When, in *The Mansion*, for example, V.K. Ratliff and Gavin Stevens travel to New York to attend the wedding of Flem’s daughter Linda to a Jewish sculptor named Bernard Kohl, they encounter a panoply of consumer objects. One in particular, a designer necktie created by a famous Russian designer named Myra Allanova, underscores the process by which commercial goods come to be valued for the surplus that their brand identity entails.

When they first arrive in New York, and Stevens and Ratliff visit the shop of Myra Allanova, where Ratliff is appalled by the notion of spending $75 dollars on a designer
necktie. Gavin Stevens convinces him to buy one, however, arguing that “at minimum” Ratliff should have been buying “one tie a year” for the last twenty years, and his acquisition of an Allanova will simply be making up for lost time. The logic that Stevens puts forth, viewed through the lens of Southern history, argues that Ratliff should adopt an inflationary ethos when it comes to his purchase of neckties. Reconciling himself to Stevens’s assessment of the situation, Ratliff returns to her shop to complete the transaction. He has just handed Allanova the money for a tie specifically designed to his specifications and tastes, when their shared Russian ancestry becomes known. In a scene that parallels Flem’s earlier acquisition of furniture made “for exactly what he was,” Ratliff’s revelation of his true identity voids the monetary aspect of the exchange from the standpoint of Allanova. She demands that he remove the money from her desk, insisting: “I have given you the ties. You cannot pay for them” (490). Ratliff, however, balks at the notion of not paying her, explaining that as a sewing machine merchant he cannot accept free ties any more than he could give away free sewing machines to his customers. As a salesman himself, he explains, he is bound to uphold the integrity of the market and economic exchange. Allanova immediately comes up with a new plan that they should burn both the money and the ties. Ratliff objects to this as well and a remarkable sequence follows:

“No,” I [Ratliff] says, “no. Not burn money, and she says “Why not?” and us both looking at each other, her hand holding the lit lighter and both our hands on the money. “Because it’s money,” I says. “Somebody somewhere At some time went to—went through—I mean money stands for too much grief somewhere to somebody that jest that wasn’t never worth—I mean, that aint [sic] what I mean.....” and she says, “I know exactly what you mean.
Only the gauche, the illiterate, the frightened and the pastless [sic] destroy money. You will keep it then. You will take it back to—how you say? “Mississippi [sic],” I says. “Mississippi [sic]. Where is one who, not needs: who cares about so base as needs? Who wants something that costs one hundred fifty dollars—a hat, a picture, a book a jewel for the ear; somewhere never never never anyhow just to eat—but believes he—she—will never have it, has even long ago given up, not the dream but the hope.”

Ratliff’s spirited defense of money in this passage suggests an orientation toward it markedly different from Flem’s. The banker has the tendency, in his fetishizing of cash, to make it disappear entirely: either by consuming it or allowing it to disappear into the vaults of his bank. As Allanova argues, however, money should “never” be something “just to eat,” providing a rationalization for an economic model not of general equilibrium, in which production equals consumption, as it does for Montgomery Ward Snopes in his pornographic theatre business, or for Flem as a consumer of furniture, but instead a model of surplus capital, with a financial remainder left behind to stoke the desires and hopes of community.

Faulkner imagines that the ideal model of consumption is one in which commodities produce excess capital or financial profits. Allanova’s tie is interesting in this regard because it a commodity whose financial value seems to derive entirely from its brand identity. Her ties, in this capacity, are not simply pricey consumer goods, but actual works of art. Examining the neckwear that Myra Allanova shows him on his first visit to her shop, Ratliff is immediately struck by the tie’s non-representational depiction of an object that seems to resemble a sunflower. What first appears to him as a
conventional flower, however, upon closer inspection “never had no sunflower [on it] and it wasn’t even red. It was jest dusty…It looked like the outside of a peach...providing you can keep from blinking, you will see the first beginning of when it starts to turn peach. Except that it don’t do that. It still jest dusted with gold, like the back of a sunburned gal” (482). Ratliff’s recognition that Allanova’s tie does not depict a sunflower, but rather represents this object abstractly marks the beginning of his initiation into the world of modern and modernist art. The above passage provides a brief history of 20th century abstract art from the pictorial representation of pre-Cubism (in which painters depicted actual peaches) through Cubism (in which objects were depicted from unconventional perspectives and angles: “[i]t looked like the outside of a peach”) to abstract expressionism (the “dust” or splatter of a Jackson Pollock). In first assessing the tie, Ratliff attempts to compare it to a familiar object, which reflects his lack of sophistication when it comes to his appraisal of art. Clement Greenberg, for example, the preeminent critic of high modernist art in the 1950s, would see Ratliff’s desire to see the tie as a “real” object as reflecting a low cultural desire for works of social realism.

For Greenberg, the “content” of modernist works of art, like the content of Allanova’s tie is “dissolved so completely into the form that the work of art or literature” became entirely non-representational.114 Ratliff’s appreciation of non-representational art could not come at a more opportune time, as he is soon thrust into the art scene of Linda Snopes and her future husband Bernard Kohl. Finding himself at a party in

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Greenwich Village among Linda and Bernard’s artist friends, he is accosted by a stranger who recognizes his tie and its designer. Ratliff reports that this guest “wasn’t even a poet or painter or sculptor or musician or even jest an ordinary moral newspaper man but evidently a haberdasher taking Sunday evening off. Because he was barely in the room before he was not only looking at [the tie] but rubbing it between his thumb and finger. ‘Allanova’ he says” (486). Ratliff’s humorous misidentification of this man as “haberdasher” stems from his inability to recognize that the designer necktie he wears functions, in fact, as a piece of art. Though the stranger makes this association for him, soon revealing himself to be a critic, or at the very least an appreciator, of the aesthetic of high-cultural modernism; he subsequently draws Ratliff away from the party into to studio space filled with abstract sculpture. The works that they observe in this studio setting possess an avant-garde quality; despite the fact that they are not described, the stranger’s question to Ratliff of whether viewing these sculptures make him feel “shocked” or “mad” suggest their aesthetic radicalism. The sculptures, however, do not shock or anger Ratliff, but instead cause him to experience a religious sensation. Confronted with the unrecognizable and new, he realizes that the point of modern art is to offer a tactile and sensory experience akin to religious conversion. “Maybe” Ratliff reasons, “when you see and feel and smell and hear and taste what you never expected to and hadn’t never even imagined until that moment, maybe that’s why Old Moster picked you out to be one of the ones to be alive” (487).

In representing his viewing of this art as a kind of religious selection by “Old Moster,” this passage underscores Clement Greenberg’s notion that modern art
required an “increasing faith” in the “purity” of the aesthetic register. For Greenberg, the traditional appraisal of paintings gives way to an experience of artistic works that, to quote his essay “The New Sculpture” (1954), “avoid[s] dependence upon any order...not given in the most essentially construed nature of its medium.” Possessing such an aesthetic outlook, as Greenberg subtly suggests through his use of words like “faith” and “purity,” mimics religious worship as the communication of a truth through experiential sensation. Ratliff recognizes that the sculptures that he sees in the studio of Bernard and Linda’s apartment are not meant to be interpreted, but rather must be primarily felt. In turn, such an experiential account of art was what drove Greenberg’s, and his contemporary Harold Rosenberg’s, valorization of abstract expressionism in the 1950s. In Rosenberg’s influential essay, “American Action Painters,” published in 1959, he argued that the virtues of the work of an artist such as Jackson Pollock was that his canvases portrayed the content of the artist’s psyche without the interference of the intermediary of representation.

If the goal of modern art, however, was to present the inner content of the artist’s mind through bypassing the practice of explicit representation, Rosenberg chief concern, highlighted in his work The Tradition of the New, was that the market, as a communicative process itself, would eclipse the aesthetic function of artistic expression. He worried that painters like Pollock would become a signature or brand that conveyed nothing more than a cultural orientation or sensibility. The fate of many important

115 Ibid, 139.
116 Ibid.
artists, Rosenberg wrote, might, in the very near future, be “communicating” simply a “unique signature,” which would imply that the artist had become a “commodity with a trademark.” In The Mansion, artistic expression of the modernist variety, which suggests having an experience rather than something representational, is shown, in turn, to depend on this brand or trademark recognition. Ratliff’s Allanova tie communicates its meaning and its quality through the stranger’s recognition that it is, in fact, an “Allanova.” Instead of constituting a problem from Faulkner’s perspective, as it does for Rosenberg, the brand serves as the instance for producing monetary value that exceeds the object’s value as a mere commodity. Allanova ties are things that will never just be eaten because they contain a surplus value attached to their value as a brand.

Faulkner’s recognition of the surplus value of brands arrives, unsurprisingly, as his own brand value as novelist was rising during the 1940s and 1950s. Lawrence Schwartz, in his book Creating Faulkner’s Reputation (1988), charts the dominance of aesthetic formalism and avant-garde modernism in the postwar period and shows how this burnished Faulkner’s image and work. From a struggling novelist in the 1930s, Faulkner enjoyed an acclaim in the 1950s that was both critical and commercial. The latter aspect, however, Faulkner’s financial success, has not been a question that literary critics for the most part have been willing to take into account. Schwartz does not fully investigate the impact of commercial publishing on Faulkner’s career, although he does call for further research “that sets the post-war changes in the book trade into the context of Cold War cultural politics where the new aestheticism led to the Nobel Prize,

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and coalesced with commercial publishing to make Faulkner’s reputation.” Not only did commercial publishing play a large role in his reputation and later career, but that his later fiction is, in an important way, about his new identity as a mass-marketed novelist. The fact that Faulkner benefited from “post-war changes in the book trade” as much as any other author during this period allows us to see why he became interested in the matter of artistic brands in his fiction written in the late 1950s. Such an interest largely arose because Faulkner’s work had become a brand itself—the modernist Southern gothic—whose commercial value grew considerably over his lifetime.

It is within the context of the postwar period, after all, that the modernist aesthetic received its cultural and commercial stamp of approval. The endorsement of writers such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot by the literary establishment, as well as the triumph of New Critical reading practices, marked an important shift toward the acceptance of the modernist aesthetic. It is not difficult to see why—in period that invested much of its political energy in cultural forms—modernism, with its critique of the status quo and middle-class lifestyles, would become so important. The New Critics

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119 Schwartz, 261.
120 According to the cultural critic Daniel Bell (writing in 1960) left politics in the 1940s and 50s moved away from a platform for fighting economic inequalities (conventional Leftist politics) toward a “conceptualization of America as a mass society, and... [an] attack on the grotesque elements of such a society [italics in original]” (The End of Ideology [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000], 312.) For Bell, journals such as Dwight MacDonald’s Dissent (begun in the 1940s) paved the way for the reinvention of political radicalism as primarily concerned with culture instead of class. The title of Bell’s famous book, The End of Ideology, has been used as shorthand to express the end of political differences in the postwar era and the emergence of a liberal consensus, but Bell does not argue that political strife simply ended in 1945. In fact, politics arguably became even more important during this time, particularly for young intellectuals, who needed an outlet for their commitments, but could find none in an America grown fat in affluence and complacency. “The young intellectual is unhappy because the ‘middle way’ is for the middle-aged,” Bell writes, “not for him; it is without passion and is deadening...In the search for a ‘cause’ there is a deep, desperate, almost pathetic anger.” When the “desperate” and “pathetic anger” of the young radicals did find a cause, it was culture and certain lifestyle choices that they choose to defend. In this way, politics in the postwar era became a vindication of artistic expression and freedom.
focus on the formal aspects of the work, rather than what the work signified or represented, was in keeping with the idea that culture provided the best way to express political dissent, independent of any outside political motivations or commitments. While an improved institutional standing brought modernist writers respectability, however, the movement also ended up losing a large part of what made it necessary in the first place—as a radical critique of the hypocrisies of politics, society and culture. What was not anticipated by its promoters and practitioners was that an increase in popularity would move the modernism aesthetic into the mainstream of American culture, making it less clear where mass commercial culture ended and the “true” art began.

The branded identity of art in *The Mansion*, such as Allanova ties, produce a capital surplus in the form of money that can be, as the Russian fashion designer herself suggests, invested in “Mississippi [sic]” to induce positive economic growth. The outcome of Ratliff’s acquisition of an Allanova tie is that he takes both the financial surplus and the neckwear back to Yoknapatawapha where it will be spent on jewels, hats and pictures by the common folk of his geographical region. In this way, trademarks become the mechanisms by which the stock of money in Faulkner’s fictional community came to be increased. The conclusion of the Snopes trilogy contains yet another example of well-known brand—on this occasion, of an entirely commercial variety—which serves to further reinforce the importance of trademarks to Faulkner’s new Southern economy. It does so, in particular, by pointing out that the value of brands exceeds the value of the commodity itself. When the character Mink Snopes, Flem’s cousin, is released from the
state penitentiary in Mississippi, he comes across perhaps the most famous commercial Southern brand, Coca Cola, for the first time in thirty eight years.

Stopping at a gas station diner for lunch shortly after leaving the prison, Mink notices cases of Coca Cola stacked against a nearby wall. He remembers the taste of the soft drink even following decades of imprisonment, and experiences such an intense desire to consume the beverage that he can barely contain himself. Mink doesn’t even allow himself to enjoy the initial Coke he drinks, his “first swallow coldly afire and too fast to taste” (564) before he realizes that he wants another. Registering his insatiable appetite for the soft drink as a kind of “horror,” which he attempts unsuccessfully to “curb and restrain,” he immediately grabs another and drinks it before he can collect himself. After consuming both bottles of Coke, Mink immediately begins to worry that the thirteen dollars and change that he carries in the bib of his overalls will not be enough to cover the price of the soft drink. He frets that inflation may have driven up the price of Coca Cola in the nearly four decades that he has been away. The proprietor of the gas station diner, sensing Mink’s ignorance about the price of certain commodities, takes advantage of him by charging him twice for the bottles of Coca Cola. As he realizes only after leaving the gas station diner “[h]e had given the man...one of the dollar bills and the man had given him back change for bread, eleven cents, lunch meat eleven cents, which was twenty-two cents, then the man had taken up the half-dollar for the sodas, which was seventy-two cents” (567). This should, if Mink’s math is indeed correct, have left him with twenty eight cents instead of the eighteen that he actually receives from the proprietor of the gas station.
Although Mink focuses on the dime that this man apparently stole from him, the price of Coke offers an interesting subtext in this passage. The price of Coca Cola famously, from the date of its inception in 1886 until the year that *The Mansion* was published, 1959, exhibited what economists refer to as “nominal price rigidity.” Over this sixty-five-year period, while the commodity price for sugar quadrupled, the price for a bottle of Coca Cola remained only 5 cents. The reason for Coca Cola’s price stickiness had to do with mainly with the way the beverage was distributed to the public through vending machines. The original vending machines for Coca Cola were created to accept only nickels, which meant that a rise in the price-per-bottle for the beverage would have meant doubling its price from 5 cents to 10. The year that *The Mansion* was published, however, the price of a bottle of Coke did in fact go up 100%, from 5 to 10 cents. The increase in the price of Coca Cola would have been of interest to William Faulkner. As his novel shows, the value of Coca Cola far exceeds even its 10 cent price point from the perspective of Mink. The proprietor of the shop overcharges the ex-con, of course, but Mink cannot control his appetite for Coca Cola at any price. “If the bottles had been a dollar a piece,” he reasons, perhaps he would have shown more caution “as there was a definite limit beyond which temptation, or at least his lack of will power, could no longer harm him” (566).

The value of Coca Cola for Mink resides in its brand identity; it is the very reason that he suggests he would be willing to pay up to a dollar to consume a bottle of the beverage. While the rest of the world around him has changed, everything about the soft drink—its taste, its logo, the iconic shape of its bottle—has stayed exactly the same.
Through portraying Mink’s desire for Coca Cola, Faulkner demonstrates that the value of the brand far surpasses the price of the commodity itself. This surplus value of the brand, similar to the Allanova tie, results in the creation of financial wealth that comes to Mink through the charity of Ratliff and Gavin Stevens. At the conclusion of the Snopes trilogy, these men track down Mink where he has gone into hiding, following his murder to his cousin Flem to present him with a cash prize: Flem’s inheritance. The most interesting thing about the money that Mink receives at the end of *The Mansion* is that he is not expected to actually do anything with it. Indeed, upon his receipt of the cash, Mink simply lies down on earth and looks up into the sky. With this monetary surplus tied firmly in his bib, Faulkner suggests that mere existence of money was the point of Mink’s strivings all along.
Conclusion: Monetarism and the Rebirth of Free Markets

As mentioned in the final chapter of this project, William Faulkner’s commitment to using monetary methods to ensure economic growth in his fictional “postage stamp” of Yoknapatawpha County, anticipates a move away from Keynesian modernism on the cultural front and a reassessment of what constituted government intervention in the macroeconomic sphere. Milton Friedman’s intellectual contribution to macroeconomics in the 1960s, which forms the basis of Faulkner’s postwar fictional project in the Snopes trilogy, departs in certain important ways from the main tenets of the Keynesian Revolution. While Friedman sought to erect an institutional body (namely, the Federal Reserve) that could discipline the vagaries of the market as they appeared—which shows, at the very least, that he is cautious about emphasizing the inherent self-correcting qualities of markets—he nonetheless believes that the minor adjustments made by central bankers are enough to stabilize financial and economic systems. The line from Freidmanism to Greenspanism is a short one. This preoccupation with monetary adjustment, moreover, refutes that essence of the Keynesianism and its insistence that the “natural equilibrium” of the economy is not something that can be consistently produced.

In order to uphold central bankers as key figures in the American economic system, economists such as Friedman further needed an ideology to go along with their monetary pragmatism; they relied on appeals to the efficiency of free markets. The complementary political volume to *A Monetary History of the United States* (1963), which describes the role of central bankers in achieving economic stability, is Friedman’s
Capitalism and Freedom, which offers a vision of free market life as crucial to political participation in democratic society. While providing the caveat that “[g]overnment responsibility for the monetary system has long been recognized,” Friedman argues against any other “interferences” the government might make outside of the institutional auspices of the Fed.¹²¹ At the end of the day, the best system for the aggregation of consumer desires and the production of commodities for Friedman is a free market unfettered from burdensome governmental regulations. For him, capitalist markets are not simply the most efficient way to conducting business, but present a moral and ethical advantage over the decisions made by governments. Markets, for Friedman, register independent choice among free participants in the political, social and economic arena, rather than depending on the assumed arbitrary decisions of self-interested bureaucrats. Unlike Minsky, who sees that financial sector of the economy as, in its essence, disruptive to macroeconomic function as a whole, Friedman believes that an active Fed system can and will make the necessary adjustments when financial crises arise, “firewalling,” in Brad DeLong’s words, the rest of the economy from the excesses of the financial sector. Making only minor adjustments to policy tools such as the interest rate and supply of money in the economy, as the particular situation dictates, free market agents in this ideological system will largely be left up to their own devices in deciding the best ways to produce and consume.

Keynesianism, however, proceeds under the assumption that the financial crises that free market proponents, including post-Keynesian thinkers such as Paul Samuelson,

regard as temporary disturbances in the economy are a natural part of all systems that define themselves as capitalistic. In Keynesian thought, government forces are needed to proactively guard against the dangers of speculative finance and ensure that this sector of the economy does not disrupt other markets, such as production or labor markets. Whether the American government is engaged in propping up private corporate forms as a way of encouraging economic stability intervening in a more direct way with spending projects of their own introduces policy differences among liberal economists and government officials, but what is unquestionable from the standpoint of liberal macroeconomic thought that followed the decade of the 1930s, is that the government has an active role to play in managing the nation’s economic matters. The notion that governments must finesse the private sector in order to get the best results, and must be a major player in postwar corporate economies is described by another true adherent of Keynes, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith in the 1950s.

The Depression-era economics of Keynes was elaborated by John Kenneth Galbraith his 1952 book *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power*. Galbraith’s theory of “countervailing power” contends that the thrust of both Keynes approach to the consumer economy, as well as the New Deal policies partially influenced by Keynes, was to promote the development of “strong buyers.” Citing the examples of Sears, Roebuck and the grocery chain of A & P, Galbraith argues that the “spectacular rise of the foods chains, the variety chains, the mail-order houses (now graduated into chain stores), the department-store chains and the cooperative buying

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organizations” that came into prominence in the first half of the twentieth century, played a special role in creating market parity with the powerful producers of goods. On one measure, these buying cooperatives were able to regulate the market for certain goods. Whereas the objective of all large producers was to maximize returns in any way they could, the typical retailer, according to Galbraith, was instead “deeply concerned with his volume of sales” and “minimizing inventory risk” (Ibid). For Galbraith, the goal of the retail firm appeared to be to maintain as high a volume of stock as possible, although it might be more accurate to say that the retail firm wanted to maintain only as high a volume of stock as it was possible to sell. Acting therefore as an intermediary between producers and their potential customers, between buyers and sellers, these retail chains like A & P functioned to stabilize any distortions in consumer demand that occurred as a result of the Depression. The ascent of the great chain stores, in Galbraith’s account, happened in the decade of the 1930s when “demand, generally, fell short of the capacity of suppliers to meet it” (136). In his interpretation of the chain store, Galbraith brings into focus aspects of Keynes insistence on the importance of consumer demand as an engine for spurring economic growth.

The fact that the government intervenes in the economy by operating through channels of private investment, investing in one corporate form over another in order to create balance, does not make any difference to Galbraith: the whole question of public and private in terms of macroeconomics is a false distinction for him. Buying cooperatives run by private individuals are essentially, in his theory at least, proxies for government intervention; what matters for Galbraith, and what mattered for Keynes, is
that one acknowledges that the economy needs to be controlled by institutional agents outside of the market. In the 1960s and 1970s, this notion of economics as a public/private partnership was abandoned for an alternative model of market man, as a separate individual focused on local concerns. The political scientist Garry Wills describes the move from this government control to market man in his book, *Nixon Agonistes*, which appeared first in 1969. In the late 1960s, Will describes both the American Left—embodied in the work of Democrat scholars and political operatives such as Daniel Moynihan and Richard Goodwin—and the American Right as returning to a version of “classical liberalism.” While Republicans such as Richard Nixon trumpeted the virtues of hard work as central to success, the “Left,” Wills writes, “was worrying about local control and Big Government, decentralization and the tax burden.”

For Wills’ perspective, the American Left’s focus on going local went hand-in-hand with the reintroduction of market man, as an isolated individual outside of the reach of government forces. As liberals such as Moynihan and Goodwin encouraged communities—racial, familiar and ethnic—to do their own thing, the Right came in and lambasted the welfare and aid programs that offered charity to disenfranchised groups, whether these groups were divided by race or class. The net result of these political changes was to propose a leaner, more streamlined theory of government, which ultimately had less impact on managing and directing the economy toward productive and efficient ends.

The culture commitments of the American artist changed as well, alongside these broader political and economic developments. Novelists become less interested in economic questions: whether those were the questions of economic want or scarcity in the proletariat works of the Depression, or the question of macroeconomic problems of financial and corporate institutions that appeared in postwar works. Writers in the 1960s and 1970s became invested in the notion of ‘doing their own thing,’ and the focus shifted from society at large to more local interests and issues. Identity politics became the focus of aesthetic projects when American liberalism and the commitments of Keynesian economics fell out of fashion in the 1960s and 1970s, as the United States became fractured along lines of race, gender and sexuality. The point is not that the politics of local interest and identity politics were a bad thing, or that they were pursued in bad faith. Many of those who sought to discover their identities anew beginning the 1960s were simply responding to the failure of government to supply them with the necessary equipment to be socially and economically secure. But this pursuit, as Wills points out, ended up accelerating the commitment to markets and the rational pursuit of self interest in a world where government could not be counted on to live up to the challenge of managing capitalism’s financial excesses and providing enough economic and social security for its citizenry.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, while economy theory has been irrevocably altered and Keynesian notions of political economy have been revived, the cultural response to these developments has proven to be lagging. To put it simply, novels and other cultural documents have failed to provide sufficient testimony and
ideas to the economic changes and challenges that American society must now meet.

There have been exceptions, of course, to this trend. The 2011 film, *Margin Call*, by J.C. Chandor, for instance, reintroduces audiences to a distinctively Keynesian mindset. The movie’s plot, written immediately following the failure of Lehman Brothers and concerning the failure of portfolio of mortgage-backed securities in a Wall Street investment house similar to Lehman, revolves around the difference between financial speculation and other kinds of productive enterprise. Toward the end of the film, the recently fired Head of Risk Management for the firm, Eric Dale (played by Stanley Tucci), sits on the steps of his expensive New York brownstone and tells Paul Bettany, another trader, about his background in civil engineering and the bridge he once constructed. As he explains: “I built a bridge once

It goes from Dilles Bottom, Ohio to Moundsville West Virginia. It spans 912 feet over the Ohio river. Steel through arch design. 12,100 people a day use the thing. It cut out 35 miles each way of extra driving to get from Wheeling to New Martinsville. That’s a combined 847,000 miles of driving a day... and 25,410,000 miles a month and 304,920,000 miles a year saved. I completed that project in 1986... 22 years ago. Over the life of that one bridge that’s 6 billion... 708 million... 240 thousand miles that haven’t had to be driven! At let’s say... 50 miles an hour that’s 134,164,800 hours... or 559,020 days... so that one little bridge has saved the people of those two communities a combined 1531 years of their lives not wasted in the car... give or take... One thousand, five hundred, thirty-one years
Tucci’s monologue not only provides a sense of how quickly his mind works when it comes to mathematical figures, but also requires us to acknowledge two different kinds of production of radically different impact: that which offers a benefit the nation more broadly (civil engineering) and that which tears apart the national economy (finance). J.C. Chandor’s film forces viewers to acknowledge different markets in the American economy and ask themselves how those markets bear on their lives, which is the theme that our next generation of artists should be committed to exploring. The main ethical question of the last 50 plus years is: what was all that financial growth for exactly? If the answer does not lie in the improvement of our lives, then we will have to challenge the premise of our commitment to markets altogether.