

‘The Bright Future of All Humanity’:
Liberal Criticism and the Soviet Union in the Twentieth Century

By

Stephen Taylor Marsh

B.A. Yale University, 2013

M.St., University of Oxford, 2015

A.M., Brown University, 2018

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of English at Brown University

Providence, Rhode Island
October 2023

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This dissertation by Stephen Taylor Marsh is accepted in its present form
by the Department of English as satisfying the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date _____
Amanda S. Anderson, Advisor

Recommended to the Graduate Council

Date _____
Philip Gould, Reader

Date _____
Ellen F. Rooney, Reader

Approved by the Graduate Council

Date _____
Thomas A. Lewis, Interim Dean
of the Graduate School

VITA

Stephen Taylor Marsh graduated from Yale University with a B.A. in Comparative Literature in 2013, from the University of Oxford with a M.St. (with distinction) in English in 2015, and received a A.M. in English from Brown University in 2018. His work was supported by an English Faculty Studentship at the University of Oxford from 2014-2015 and by a Mellon Graduate Fellowship in Collaborative Humanities in 2017-2018. From Brown, he holds a certificate both in “Reflective Teaching: I” from the Sheridan Center and in “Collaborative Humanities” from the Cogut Institute for the Humanities.

Stephen’s first scholarly article, “Self-Sacrifice in the Autobiographical Narration of David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*,” was published in *Biography* in 2016. He has presented his work at meetings of the American Comparative Literature Association, the American Literature Association, the Northeast Modern Language Association, and at a variety of other subject-specific conferences. He has served as a peer reviewer for *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, *Lifewriting Annual*, and the *Oxford Review of English*.

At Brown, Stephen was the co-organizer of the Post45 and Contemporary Working Group in 2018 and its sole organizer from 2019 to 2020. He has taught a variety of classes on American and British literature, in particular nineteenth and twentieth-century literature, as well as courses on writing to undergraduates.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank the members of my committee, who were the bedrock of this project. Amanda Anderson has been a wonderful advisor and advocate for the entirety of my time in the program at Brown, and without her, this work simply would not exist. She taught me that argument is a lived practice, not merely a task on the way to a larger goal, and her comments—always demonstrating a rare combination of generosity and incisiveness—only ever made my work better. Phil Gould taught me to always pay heed to history in research, and his constant support strengthened this project's connection to its specifically American aspects. Ellen Rooney is one of the finest teachers I've ever had the privilege of learning from, and her patient, careful, and thoughtful questions directed towards so many different parts of this text improved it in a way that's hard to quantify. Thank you all for believing in me, and believing in the project, even during the difficult times through which this book was written.

Portions of my research were aided immensely by the resources and staffs of special collections libraries and archives, who work tirelessly to enable cutting-edge research. I would like to acknowledge the Special Collections Library at UCLA; the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University; the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas Austin; the Beinecke Library at Yale University; the Weston Library of the Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford; and especially the Manuscript

Division of the Library of Congress, where I spent a summer working through Ralph Ellison's and Hannah Arendt's papers.

At Brown, I benefited from helpful suggestions on this project in a variety of contexts. The Brown Americanists group and the English Department's Post-45 and Contemporary Working Group were the stages where I developed many of these ideas and worked out many of these arguments. Teaching experiences, coursework, and conversations with faculty made differences great and small. I want to thank, in no particular order, Kevin Quashie, Kevin McLaughlin, Peter Szendy, Rolland Murray, Tamar Katz, Marc Redfield, Tim Bewes, Stuart Burrows, Carol DeBoer-Langworthy, Leela Gandhi, Bonnie Honig, Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, Daniel Kim, Deak Nabers, Ben Parker, Ada Smailbegović, and Robert Ward for their support before and during the writing of this book. I specifically want to thank Jim Egan for his mentorship and his kindness. The English Department would not have functioned for much of my time in graduate school were it not for the work of the inimitable Lorraine Mazza, who helped me in so many ways at so many different points that appropriately thanking her would take many more pages; her retirement is well-deserved. Thanks, too, to Ellen Viola, Marilyn Netter, Marianne Costa, Aryn Fine, and Sarah Madsen in the English Department, and to Kit Salisbury, Traude Kastner, and Damien Mahiet at the Cogut Institute for the Humanities for their hard work navigating University systems.

The most formative experience of my time in graduate school was the certificate program in Collaborative Humanities, administrated by the Cogut Institute, and in particular the Project Development Workshop, its capstone seminar. That group of people, more than most others, had a profound positive impact on this project's sense of

scale and its stakes. Amanda and Tamara Chin were exceptional leaders of the workshop, and along with the staff at the Cogut, did incredible work designing and orchestrating the program's first Collaborative Public Workshop during the 2018-2019 academic year.

Thanks, too, to Damien, who coordinated the program. Corey Robin and Melvin Rogers provided extremely helpful feedback to my chapter on Ralph Ellison, and I am grateful for their attention and thoughtfulness. But most of all I want to thank the fellow members of the project workshop that year: Chris DiBona, Aaron Jacobs, Chumie Juni, Irina Kalinka, Pedro Lopes de Almeida, Caleb Murray, N'Kosi Oates, Ula Rutkowska, and Jan Tabor. You were the best group of fellow scholars and friends I could have asked for.

The germ of this project was planted long ago, during my time at Yale and at Oxford. I want to thank Moira Fradinger, John MacKay, Tim Snyder, Paul Grimstad, Rüdiger Campe, Michael Morgan, Howard Stern, Yue Zhuo, George Chauncey, Geoffrey Hartman, and Richard Deming for teaching me so much about the breadth and romance of ideas. Martin Hägglund showed me what it meant to commit to an intellectual position. Patrick Hayes gave me the space to write what would become my article on David Foster Wallace, and helped me refine that project above and beyond the call of duty. Lloyd Pratt shepherded me through the bizarre worlds of Oxford and of graduate school in general, and I deeply appreciate his advice during my M.St. and after. Marci Shore sparked my interest in the dissident existential philosophy of Central and Eastern Europe, and her writing is always an example to me of the heights writing could reach. Michael Warner is a model scholar, both as a writer and a teacher, and I am so thankful for his support over the years. Haun Saussy introduced me to theory, and it is no exaggeration to say that he is the reason I'm the thinker I am today.

I am grateful to my friends from the English Department and from other programs at Brown, who offered insight, camaraderie, and fun conversations over cocktails. Thanks to Suzy Kim, Christopher Yates, MJ Cunniff, Ahona Palchoudhuri, Arlen Austin, and Michael Gastiger, in addition to the friends mentioned above from the Project Development Workshop—I appreciate you all so much. I especially want to thank Ilan Ben-Meir, who has been a presence in my life since 2009. He helped me prep for my qualifying exams, has talked me through problems philosophical and bureaucratic, and is one of the most intellectually impressive people I know. Cheers to you; thank you so much for all your years of friendship.

Outside of Brown, I am grateful for my local friends. Nick Vasios, Natassa Tzoumaka, Sara Corben, Dan Lopes, Max Beasley, Melissa Pielech, Mina Asayesh-Brown, Alex West, Alana Sacks, Justin Enis, and Paul Kettelle, thank you all for always being good for a drink (alcoholic or otherwise) or a hike, helping me keep things in perspective, and helping me build a life in Providence that I’m proud of. Full Range Fitness has become a home away from home and has helped me learn what it means to be strong. And beyond Providence, I cannot adequately express my gratitude for the friends who, wherever they are now, have been there for so much of my life: Brian Hoefling, Caroline Posner, Max Jacobson, Linnea Iannazzone, Yang Li, Alec Kinczewski, David Crosson, Scott Beru, Alexander Martone, and Fernando Reyes. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart; I owe who I am to each and every one of you.

I would also like to offer thanks to FromSoftware, whose games—especially *Bloodborne* and *Elden Ring*—taught me resilience and helped get me through some of the most difficult parts of writing this book.

My family-in-law have been a source of joy for me for several years, and their unfailing kindness and generosity have made life so much brighter. Thanks to Daniel Wack and Mimi Wack for welcoming me into your home and your family. Thanks especially to Veronica Kelly, whose experience in academia, in addition to her graciousness, have helped me better understand my experiences in graduate school and get through it in one piece. My family have always been there for me, and I am not capable of adequately expressing my gratitude to them: Lyndsey Marsh, my sister, and Marilyn Katz, my mom. My dad, Wayne Marsh, passed away when I was in high school, and I'm sorry that he couldn't be here to see me finish this project. Thank you for your love; thank you for everything.

Claudia Wack, my wife, is the best person I know. She is the reason I made it through at all. From her tolerance for hearing me rant about parts of this project, her good eye for cleaning up incoherent writing, and the innumerable small ways she's made my life easier on a day-to-day basis to her confidence in me, she has made her mark on this work more than any other person. Thank you for pushing me to be better, and especially to be kinder to myself; thank you for being you. This book is dedicated to her.

“Our work has only begun. It has long to await completion and the earth has yet much to suffer, but we shall triumph and shall be Caesars, and then we shall plan the universal happiness of man [...] And all will be happy, all the millions of creatures—all except those who rule over them. For we, the Party, shall be unhappy. We alone shall be free. But we alone are strong enough for the burdens of freedom. We have corrected your work.”

Vladimir Lenin to Abraham Lincoln, as imagined by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*, 1949

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
To Not Acquiesce: Will, Necessity, and the Refusal of Stalinist Dialectical Materialism in Lionel Trilling	20
Self-Fashioning: Ralph Ellison and the Problem of the Soviet “New Man”	69
Love for Others: James Baldwin and the Problems of Intimate Devotion under the Soviet Gaze	112
The Responsibility to Perceive	159
Conclusion	195
Notes	203
Works Cited	221

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Still from “The Happiness of All Mankind.” HBO, 2019, <https://perma.cc/8P82-J97Q>.

Figure 2. Picture of a town hall in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. Photo by *The Travel Pockets*, 5 August 2019, <https://perma.cc/BW33-VX8Q>.

Figure 3. Selection from *V for Vendetta*, by Alan Moore and David Lloyd. DC Comics, 1990.

INTRODUCTION

“Somewhere In the Night a Human Being Is Drowning”¹

Come, sit. Let me tell you a story.

A young man arrives in a truck at a tent city.² His name is Pavel, and he is twenty-three years old. It is sometime after April 26, 1986, somewhere near Prypiat³, a city along the Belorussian border in what was then the Ukrainian SSR and is now Ukraine. Pavel is a conscript. He is meant to be a ліквідатор, a “liquidator.” A liquidator is essentially a janitor, but for radiation. Pavel will be cleaning part of the fallout from the explosion of Reactor #4 at what is formally called the “Vladimir I. Lenin Nuclear Power Plant,” but is known by everyone after the district in which it is located: Чорнобильська, Chornobyl.⁴

In a tent, Pavel meets the two men with whom he will be working, Bacho and Garo. Bacho and Garo are older than Pavel, by who knows how much in reality but certainly visibly. Bacho and Garo have both been to Afghanistan. They fought in the war, which the Soviet Union would lose in three years’ time. Their job that day is what Bacho calls “animal control.” They will ride into a nearby village, dig a pit, line it with concrete, and then shoot all the irradiated cats and dogs left behind by their owners during the evacuation.

After a morning of hard work, the three sit down for a lunch break. Pavel cannot eat. He has killed for the first time, a dog in the village. He shot it badly and left it wounded. Bacho had to end its suffering. Bacho, in an attempt at sympathy, describes his first experience of killing: in Afghanistan, he shot a man in the stomach who had surprised him around a corner and left him to bleed out on the floor of his home. When Bacho finishes his tale, Garo speaks for the first time. He says: “The happiness of all mankind.” Both Pavel and Bacho are visibly confused. Garo gestures upward. On the peeling slant-roofed building next to them hangs an enormous red banner, which they had somehow failed to see. The banner reads, in Russian, “НАША ЦЕЛЬ – СЧАСТЬЕ ВСЕГО ЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСТВА”: the phrase Garo had said, “Our goal – the happiness of all mankind.” The last word isn’t visible; the right side of the banner is twisted up and touching the ground. The banner is clearly too big for the building it’s on. Bacho gets up, and with a mystifying combination of emotions leaking out of his stony face, says “I’m happy. I’m happy every day.” They get back to work.



Figure 1 – still from “The Happiness of All Mankind,” HBO, <https://perma.cc/8P82-J97Q>.

Craig Mazin, when he wrote this scene from the 2019 HBO miniseries *Chernobyl*, imagined an even bigger banner, one spread across two buildings, with a picture of Lenin

on one side and a “proud Soviet worker” on the other.⁵ Being an American writing almost thirty years after the Soviet Union’s end, he also Americanizes it. The banner is written in Russian, despite the scene taking place in Ukraine. The phrase “the happiness of all mankind” evokes the Declaration of Independence, not Marx, and certainly not Lenin. Lenin would probably find the idea of “happiness” being the “goal” of a state funny. That banner is a deliberate and obvious metaphor, a thirty-foot irony meant to darken our reception of Pavel’s experience. But the banner is real, a version of it anyway. One such banner can be found in a ghost town inside the Exclusion Zone, maybe one like the place Pavel visits, in the town hall.

In the large, empty room, the window-glass is blown out, and paint is flaking off the walls. The ceiling has begun to discolor from leaks and moisture, and several of the floorboards are broken. But the molding around the light fixture is ornate, replicating the motif of the molding around the large side windows, which without glass lets even more natural light stream in. In the back is a large stage, the same floral motif from the light fixture and the windows decorating either side. Two small, three-step staircases lead from the floor to the stage. If you close your eyes, you might be able to imagine some local official intoning Marxist dicta from that stage at a town meeting, no one really listening; or children performing a play. Maybe a teenage girl recited a poem there for a talent show. Maybe a twenty-three-year-old liquidator killed for the first time there.

Above that stage hangs the banner. It is in remarkably good condition for having been abandoned for decades. It is red. The slogan on it is written in Ukrainian, not Russian, which makes sense for a village in Ukraine, one that the ministers in Moscow probably never thought about. The message is different. This banner reads: “Хай живе

комунізм – світле майбутнє всього людства.” Or, translated into English, “Long live Communism—the bright future of all humanity.”

That slogan, that banner, oversaw a small slice of life in the Soviet Union. It oversaw death there. It testified to what the Soviet government said it would do. It witnessed what it eventually did. I don’t know if that banner is still there—the picture was taken in 2019, and a lot has happened in Ukraine since then—but, if it is, it exists in a world where the ideology it represented might have passed away, but that ideology’s ways of doing things have mutated and live on in new forms here and beyond this area of the world. It’s a promise as well as a warning, a hope as well as a tragedy, a relic of something important that never really disappeared.



Figure 2 – a town hall in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, photo by The Travel Pockets, <https://perma.cc/BW33-VX8Q>.

In a way, the goal of this book is to make sense of that banner.

'The Bright Future of All Humanity': Liberal Criticism and the Soviet Union in the Twentieth Century is a book principally about Americans, about literary criticism in particular, and about a relatively small subset of individual writers. It deals with history, and draws some of its core ideas from intellectual historians, but it does not pretend to be *an* intellectual history. At its heart, this book is an attempt to better understand the middle years of the twentieth century. It is an attempt to answer a question that seems odd on face: philosophically speaking, what difference did the Soviet Union make?

The Союз Советских Социалистических Республик, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, was for the seventy-four years of its existence one of the two pillars of the world. It was one of three nations that divided Europe at Yalta in 1945; along with the United States, it was one of two geopolitical entities that, for the bulk of the twentieth century, had the ability to eradicate life on Earth at its discretion (and almost did in 1963). In its contest for domination over “unaligned” countries in what was called the Third World, the USSR often framed itself as an egalitarian and liberatory counterweight to an imperialistic and bigoted United States, often drawing attention to the United States’s treatment of its minority populations (usually conveniently neglecting to mention its own treatment of its minorities). Whether inviting a group of Black artists and civil rights activists to make a documentary about racial inequality in America in 1933, or conducting a “veritable barrage of broadcasting to foreign audiences” covering Martin Luther King, Jr.’s sit-ins in Birmingham, the Soviet Union was always prepared to frame itself as a champion of the marginalized.⁶ Moreover, in some corners of the popular imagination the Soviet Union was seen as liberty’s “light,” the first country in the history

of humankind ruled by the worker, the lowly, the “prisoners of starvation,” as the “Internationale” sung—not by king or landlord; a spirit which even now “could be ours,” where “if its sentences are still unfinished, it is up to us to finish them.”⁷ But what are those sentences, really? What consequences might obtain from doing so, both good and bad?

In this book, I argue that much of liberal literary and cultural writing in the mid-twentieth century United States is built on a specific philosophical critique of the state ideology of the USSR. Working in both fiction and criticism, these writers focused on the specific challenges that Soviet ideology posed for the project of human liberation. The writers I examine here—Lionel Trilling, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Susan Sontag, among others—were part of a group that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, leaned to the left, and praised the Russian Revolution of 1917 as the start of the path to a redeemed future.⁸ To call Bolshevism a “God that failed,” as an important volume of dissident writing edited by Richard Crossman was entitled, does entail thinking of it as a God, one whose failure is in some sense pitiable.⁹ It is important to remember and understand that Communism could be appealing to reasonable people. As Tony Judt puts it, they could be “irresistibly drawn to the underlying ethical message: to the power of an idea and a movement uncompromisingly attached to representing and defending the interests of the wretched of the earth.”¹⁰ That moral paean is what gives the disillusionment of the liberals I discuss here its meaning, its philosophical and affective depth.

But slowly, eventually, for a variety of stated reasons, these writers began to perceive that something was wrong. In policy, the beginning of Stalin’s rule marked the

beginning of the hollowing-out of the old Bolshevik guard through purges and show trials; of the delegates at the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress in 1934, the number remaining by the time of the Twenty-Eighth five years later, in 1939, was less than two percent.¹¹ Between 1929 and 1936, Stalin engineered a famine through collectivization policies that, together with the policy of dekulakization [раскулачивание], sought to subjugate the peasantry of the Soviet Union and in particular the people of Ukraine, leaving fourteen and a half million people dead.¹² Stalin, for his part, was not ambiguous about his theoretical justification for these and other actions. In the major theoretical section of the most important book of the Stalinist period, which I will analyze at greater length in Chapter 1, Stalin repeatedly says that the birth of new societies involves the yielding of “the spontaneous process of development [...] to the conscious actions of men, peaceful development to violent upheaval, evolution to revolution.”¹³

Many Communists and their fellow-travelers insisted that Stalin was an aberration, a violation of the spirit in which the Russian Revolution had been won and Marx’s Communism first articulated. The Hungarian literary critic György Lukács, for example—a Communist who ended up on the losing side of the Party’s bloody internecine wars but survived—argued that “the tragic aspect of Stalin’s career was that his own practice, and many of his pronouncements, helped to encourage economic subjectivism in the Soviet Union,” and that Stalin’s “‘personality cult’ was expressed often enough in Stalin’s cavalier attitude to scientific facts and objective laws,” the stuff of individual mistakes, not any kind of deep structural fault.¹⁴

The writers I examine here did not see things in this way. While they might have been spurred to reassess the philosophical project of the Soviet Union by the nightmares

of Stalin's policies, they ultimately concluded that Stalin's reign *did* represent something true about the nature of Communism as it developed in Russia. Each of the writers I explore in this book focused on different elements of it, but they share a common understanding, explicit or no, that the ideologists of the Soviet Union had developed something new, a novel and distinctive worldview more foreign to their sensibilities than they initially understood. The vision they saw was built around understanding that the Communist *telos*, the thing that seemed to people like them to be "the first time in the human exploit [that] the key of a philosophy of history was to fit an historical lock," could not be actualized in the world as it currently existed.¹⁵ The new world was far from being the product of what Alexandre Kojève famously suggested: that the free movement of dialectics in History would, of the worker's own volition but also inevitably, like a Kantian imperative, liberate the worker's consciousness and therefore the entire world.¹⁶ Rather, the Communist utopia had to be imposed, and it required different materials than were ready to hand. It could only be achieved by producing a world devoid of ambiguity and, with it, a faceless mass humanity, a group of human beings wrought in Bolshevism's image.

These writers used what they knew—the worlds of cultural production, cultural criticism, and the form of the novel in particular—to critique this worldview and assert an opposing one: a way of being that took humans as they were and would not submit to the transformations required of it by the Communist *telos*. At the same time, their view would not be reducible to what we might assume to be the stagnating state liberalism of their day, governed by the hypertrophy of what Lionel Trilling, in the preface to his book *The Liberal Imagination*, called liberalism's "organizational impulse."¹⁷ In this I follow

from Amanda Anderson's project to reimagine liberalism as a "felt response to a manifold set of conditions and experiences" which "allows one to see its internal complexity, particularly the aspirations and doubts that accompany its development and some of its most defining historical moments."¹⁸ But *'The Bright Future of All Humanity': Liberal Criticism and the Soviet Union in the Twentieth Century* aims to identify the specific ways that these writers used literature, art, and culture to interpret the substance of the new world the Soviet government wanted to create.

To do this, I will draw on the intellectual historian Peter E. Gordon, who has done significant work exploring the concretion of ideas, and especially of philosophical systems, into the world. In his book *Continental Divide*, which is about an ideological contest between the philosophers Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger, he defines what he calls the "ramification" of concepts as:

what happens when philosophers begin to imagine the manifold of connections between their own arguments and the world they inhabit [...] Paradoxically, however, a concept begins to ramify the instant it is conceived; there is no moment of pure thought that does not immediately take on a further meaning. Conceptual ramification is therefore nothing "external." It is the concept itself, conceived according to one of its historical possibilities.¹⁹

For Gordon, the idea of conceptual ramification is simply how ideas work. All ideas are of the world in which they are thought, and therefore can alter the world, in however slight a way, from the moment they are first conceived. In that way, this book is in part a project in understanding ramification: understanding how the liberal writers I investigate begin to imagine "the manifold of connections" between their ideas and the world. But, in a sense, this is also the exploration of a backwards ramification, where the writers at hand spend considerable effort exploring the "manifold of connections" between the ideas at

the heart of the Soviet Union and the world it inhabits, like a kind of conceptual anthropology. And even still it is a philosophical project, dedicated to parsing whatever concepts we can draw from Trilling's, Ellison's, Baldwin's, and Sontag's contextualized reflections and arguments, and seeing what use, if any, they might still have for us today.

Gordon, helpfully, provides another concept to give shape to that task: the idea of a "normative image of humanity." He defines the normative image in this sense as "an intuitive notion that provides an initial sense of orientation for philosophical argument [...] a condition for thinking about ourselves at all [...] a primitive stratum that embraces, even if it is not limited to, metaphor and affect" (Gordon, 5-6). The "normative image of humanity" may be argued about, its contours subject to debate, but it is also in a certain sense preconceptual; it is the foundation on top of which any discussion of the human condition, to borrow Arendt's term, must rest. In a sense, the debate being staged here, even if it is not had on remotely equal terms, is one between two different "normative images of humanity," one developed in the Soviet imagination, the other developed in response to that image, meant to give shape to the costs that, to achieve the Soviet vision, must be paid.

I argue that the "normative image of humanity" held by these writers, at times explicitly but more often implicitly in their views of cultural activity, is a revaluation of the concept of the individual, and in particular the individual will. This image of humanity was of an active being, the antithesis of the subject of Soviet "self-criticism" [Самокритика], who compulsively abnegates itself by the disclosure of its "shortcomings in [its] work," for whom self-criticism "is as necessary [...] as air or water."²⁰ This normative image of humanity, conversely, is defined first by the condition

of its freedom. Bound in part by the constraints imposed upon it by the impersonal forces of nature and society, what Trilling calls in an essay “necessity,” and wrought by virtue of its expression of self, its “will,” in the face of those constraints, this image of the human being treats its self-articulation as a developmental and ongoing project; it maintains a firm distinction between its interiority and exteriority in order to turn the crafting of identity into an art form. But this image is not built wholly alone; living in a society, the free individual must engage discursively with the world—in one’s intimate relationships with others as well as a democratic polity, where argument and disagreement could open a path to some form of collective flourishing.

Ultimately, I argue that this normative image of humanity constitutes the core of the liberalism these writers express. In their own ways, Trilling, Ellison, Baldwin, and Sontag are telling a version of the same story: a story of *becoming free*. By “becoming free,” I mean to differentiate this form of liberalism from the more conventional formulations of classical liberalism, where human beings “are naturally in [...] a *State of perfect Freedom* to order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the Will of any other Man,” as John Locke argued.²¹ Instead, I mean to emphasize a process of development visible in the thinking of each of these writers where freedom is something struggled for, that is constructed for oneself out of ambiguity, complexity, and variation, and that is never truly completed. It is more along the lines of freedom as imagined by the Czech post-phenomenological philosopher Jan Patočka, a student of both Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and the principal author of the civil and human rights petition Charter 77, who argues that:

Freedom, in the end, is freedom for truth, in the form of the uncovering of being itself, of its truth, and not only of what-is (in the form of open comportment and the correctness of statements.) Freedom is not an aspect of human nature but rather means that Being itself is finite, that it lives in the shaking of all the naïve “certainties” that would find a home among what-is so that they would not need to admit to themselves that humans have no home other than this all-revealing and free being which for that very reason cannot “be” as particular existents are.²²

For Patočka, freedom is not a right that inheres to persons, a “state of perfect freedom” as Locke contended, but is a precondition of human being in and of itself. Freedom is a disruptive force, one that undoes “naïve ‘certainties’” and resists its own containment; this is the substance of the idea of “freedom for truth.” Freedom, in fact, seems here to pre-exist being entirely, insofar as it is the recognition that “Being itself is finite,” that there is something outside of Being that circumscribes it, that precedes it, that defines human life as in some sense distinct from the being of all other existents. Elsewhere, Patočka says that the defining “expression[s] of human freedom” are “thought and language”: they are how human beings relate to the world, relate to “particular existents” and even to “Being itself.” They constitute what we might identify as human consciousness.²³ This idea of consciousness, understood in Patočka’s way, is a freedom defined not by what is provided to human beings, but by what is stripped away in order to discover that which precedes being and pursue its truth. “Life unsheltered, a life of outreach and initiative without pause nor ease,” Patočka writes, “does not seek to escape its contingency, but neither does it yield to it passively; since it has glimpsed the possibility of authentic life, that is, life as a whole, the *world* opens itself to it for the first time” (Patočka, “Beginning,” 39). The liberalism of this book is a philosophy of freedom as Patočka describes it. This freedom is a consciousness that precedes being; it is a difficult freedom, one of a “life unsheltered,” that discards all consolation and all

certainties in pursuit of a form of life that Patočka's student Václav Havel often described: "living within the truth."²⁴

I do not mean to imply that the liberals of the mid-twentieth century, as I interpret them here, were engaged in some sort of abstract "crisis of man" discourse of the sort Mark Greif describes as "unreadable," "tedious," and "unhelpful" because it was "empty," because "the proliferation of answers, not their conclusion, seems to be the underlying point."²⁵ The vision I lay out here is distinctive and important precisely *because* it is a response, a calibrated alternative to the shape of the human being laid out across many fields of Soviet ideological writing: literary, psychological, and scientific, to name just a few. It is not a warmed-over restatement of the classical liberal idea of the individual, the subject of economic autonomy elaborated by Adam Smith, nor is it a normative image of humanity compatible with the neoliberal subject, *homo oeconomicus* as Wendy Brown calls it, a being defined by its total constraint by "market-instrumental rationality."²⁶ *Homo oeconomicus*, after all, is framed as a new species in the same form as *Homo sovieticus*, both and each a vision of what the human being could *become*, not what the human being *is* in relation to its world, as I will argue in Chapter 2. The idea I have laid out here is best understood in its ramified terms: as an intuitive, prefigural image, not completely conceptualizable nor fully articulated, the other term in a fundamental distinction with the Soviet image of a human being revised and refashioned as the proper subject of a fully rationalized world.

OVERVIEW

'The Bright Future of All Humanity': Liberal Criticism and the Soviet Union in the Twentieth Century takes a comparativist approach, bringing together not only twentieth-century American and Russian culture, but also literary studies, cultural criticism, and philosophy. It focuses on novels, particularly those written by American writers also active in literary criticism, in addition to critical essays. It takes seriously the intellectual and philosophical content of the Soviet material that its subjects defined themselves against, and thus engages it directly: it takes up the writings of Communist thinkers and Soviet ideologists, ranging from novelists like Aleksandr Fadeev to psychologists like Aron Zalkind all the way up to the works of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin themselves. As the book progresses, it will also underscore the mobility of the ideas the Soviets developed beyond their own historical existence. As Trilling presciently identified in his image of the “swing of the pendulum” in *The Middle of the Journey*, the quiescence of the will and the urge for control are happy to “ride the pendulum” to whatever system can accommodate them, averting the assertion of the “motion of growth.”²⁷ Those ideas by no means have passed into history. They exist to this day in various forms, most notably the rising right authoritarianisms of the early twenty-first century, of which Vladimir Putin’s Russia—a kleptocratic state that continues to survive by virtue of “the Russian citizen weaned on generations of doublethink and collective hostage-taking: the Homo Sovieticus”—is perhaps the archetypal example.²⁸

Chapter 1, “To Not Acquiesce: Will, Necessity, and the Refusal of Stalinist Dialectical Materialism in Lionel Trilling,” examines Trilling’s valorization of the confrontation between the individual will and conditions of natural and social limitation

(which he calls “necessity”) in light of Marx’s, Lenin’s, and Stalin’s theories of dialectical and historical materialism. I argue that Stalin’s worldview entails a radical understanding of dialectical materialism, wherein dialectics are fully manipulable by sufficient force—the force of a state, specifically—and, by creating dialectical movement, the world can be fashioned in any way one wishes. This view is dependent on Marx’s original phenomenological premise that the world is available to human understanding through human “practical activity”: that is, labor. Trilling strikes against this premise by making two related arguments: first, that human beings are subject to forces outside of their control, but to which they are obligated to respond nonetheless; and second, that in so responding human beings grow, developing in their emotional and moral cores and in their humanity. I will examine both Trilling’s critical writings and his novel, *The Middle of the Journey*, where I will turn my attention to the story of the Caldwelles—the tragic plot that undergirds the more commonly appreciated novel of ideas that takes place alongside it. Through the contemplation that attends suffering, the novel’s protagonist, John Laskell, finds a middle path: one that refuses absolute responsibility and absolute irresponsibility both, that can find freedom and meaning in the acceptance of unpredictability.

Chapter 2, “Self-Fashioning: Ralph Ellison and the Problem of the Soviet ‘New Man,’” examines the idea of self-fashioning—the development of an individual self through a process of *bricolage*, choice, and personal will—in Ralph Ellison’s concept of “variation.” In his essays and in *Invisible Man*, Ellison consistently identifies variation, which he associates closely with jazz, as a distinctively American virtue. In his understanding, the substance of variation centralizes the African American experience

within the American experience, producing a strong theory of racial integration that informs the rest of Ellison's thinking about the construction of identity. By juxtaposing Ellison's work alongside the developing concept of the Soviet "new man" (in both its own representation in Soviet socialist realism and its critical reception in Czesław Miłosz's *The Captive Mind*), I argue that Ellison's insistence on the American-ness of variation is, in fact, an argument about the existential importance of the individual human being. At stake in understanding Ellison's commitments, particularly in *Invisible Man*'s rendering of the fall and redemption of Clifton, is a renewed sense of the individual will as a hermeneutic lens and the creation of personality as a form of artistic practice.

Chapter 3, "Love for Others: James Baldwin and the Problems of Intimate Devotion under the Soviet Gaze," expands on the problematics introduced in Chapter 2, directing itself outwards towards other people and attending to the question "what is the proper object of human devotion?" In this chapter, I argue that James Baldwin's Civil Rights-era attention to the importance of "love" in politics, specifically intimacy between particular persons, is a response to the novel Soviet concept that a person can direct their intimate devotion to an abstraction. Analyzing Baldwin's concern about how people interact with institutions, ideas, and movements in the mid-twentieth century—among them the Nation of Islam—illuminates the consequences of depersonalization, as he sees them, and helps reevaluate his commitment to values of individual discretion, idiosyncrasy, and intimacy across his body of work. Like Ellison, Baldwin advances a theory of racial integration that marks his liberalism and informs his understanding of the relationship between persons. By using the medium of fiction to experiment with different modes of shared human experience in his novel *Another Country*, I argue,

Baldwin elaborates a model where to “insist on, or create, the consciousness of others”—a process which he argues would allow Americans to “end the racial nightmare” and “achieve our country” in equal measure—is an ethical as well as an epistemological value.

Finally, Chapter 4, “The Responsibility to Perceive,” regards Susan Sontag’s career-long examination of perceiving an object for “what it is, not what it means” as an implicit theorization of an ethics of seeing, wherein the encounter between perceiver and world is the philosophical cornerstone of democratic society as such. Whereas Sontag focuses on the application of different philosophies of perception to art and aesthetics, I argue that the substance of her critiques of interpretation and mediacy are, in fact, a commitment to the idea of a common reality and common world, out of which persons can disagree with one another and form social and political life. Animating her analysis of the public reception of the events of September 11, 2001, is an identification of the persistent allure of Soviet self-abnegation—then present in the neoconservatism of George W. Bush—and the converse of that denial, the life lived in reality, democratically, among others.

METHOD

This book’s scope extends to two continents, North America and Eurasia, and engages with not only a variety of political and philosophical traditions, but also entirely different sets of base political assumptions. The intellectual world within the remit of Moscow operated on traditions, unspoken agreements, and discursive codes that may seem foreign to American eyes. But I agree with Timothy Snyder when he contends that

“there are some interesting points of overlap between the Cold War liberals,” a group that includes the subjects of this study, “and the east European dissidents.” As Tony Judt had argued not long before, in the period of the beginning of liberalism’s political decline in the United States and in the West more generally, liberalism begins to assert itself “from elsewhere,” from “intellectuals for whom liberalism had never been an un-interrogated default condition of politics, but rather as a radical objective to be sought at considerable personal risk.”²⁹

Out of wildly different conditions, a liberalism not unlike the one I describe as developing in the work of Trilling, Ellison, Baldwin, and Sontag emerges, one that registers affective existential density and dispenses with any gap “between political liberalism and liberal aesthetics,” of the sort of greater issue in analytic Western liberal philosophy.³⁰ Though there are some historical connections of note—Sontag, for example, had a deep investment in Bosnia in the 1990s, going so far as to produce and direct a performance of *Waiting for Godot* during the Serbian siege of Sarajevo³¹—I do not contend that this relationship is more than harmonic. Harmonies, however, can convey sense, making connections that enrich experience and understanding. So, alongside its attention to Soviet ideological sources, *The Bright Future of All Humanity*: *Liberal Criticism and the Soviet Union in the Twentieth Century* also thinks alongside a variety of dissident thinkers from Central and Eastern Europe. Leszek Kołakowski and Czesław Miłosz from Poland; Jan Patočka and Václav Havel from the former Czechoslovakia; Svetlana Alexievich from Belarus: each sheds a unique light on the normative image of humanity I am trying to elaborate here. In their own ways, they each offer what Havel, in a speech to the United States Congress after becoming the first

president of free Czechoslovakia and then Czechia, said that his people could offer to Americans: “our experience and the knowledge that has come with it,” the knowledge of a “person who cannot move and lead a somewhat normal life because he is trapped under a boulder” and thus consequently “has more time to think about his hopes.”³² These writers also have the ancillary benefit of presenting clearer explanations of the underlying logic of Soviet ideology than Soviet ideologists typically do; they have no reason to defend it and have nothing to obscure. In several chapters, one or more of these thinkers will serve as theoretical benchmarks, helping to make clear the logic of an argument, its stakes, or both.

But the evening is still young, and the fire is warm. Let us continue.

TO NOT ACQUIESCE:
Will, Necessity, and the Refusal of Stalinist Dialectical Materialism in Lionel Trilling

Our story begins a little later—in 1973—and in a different location—in the United Kingdom, at Cambridge—than you might expect. In that time, at that place, Lionel Trilling delivered “Art, Will, and Necessity,” a lecture oriented primarily towards sparring with two, as he argues, opposing but symptomatic arguments about art. The first, Harold Rosenberg’s book *The De-Definition of Art*, is not relevant to the argument here. I will focus on the second, an essay written earlier that year by the scholar Robert Scholes entitled “The Illiberal Imagination.” I do so not to litigate Scholes’s or Trilling’s arguments for their own sake, but only to highlight a single passing remark Trilling makes about Scholes. This one statement provides us with a means to grapple with Trilling’s entire philosophical project.

Scholes’s essay has two goals. The first is to survey the then-emerging tradition of the postmodern novel, characterized by writers like John Barth, Iris Murdoch, and Thomas Pynchon. The second is to mark structuralism, then also a relatively new phenomenon in the American academy, as the age’s defining mode of reading: one gesturing towards the need for new forms of literary and political illiberalism.¹ Politics, being the subject of the last paragraph of Scholes’s essay, were to him the natural conclusion of a new illiberal literary consciousness; he called explicitly for the development of a “politics of structure (and a politics of love)” which entailed, in some measure, “try[ing] to be born again.”² Scholes names “ecological thinking” as one

potential instance of this new “politics of structure,” but his vision in this paragraph is clearly aspirational. It is directed towards some heretofore unimaginable new structure of social organization prophesied in the novels of the time that would one day, perhaps just over the horizon, arrive for all—or otherwise “we shall deserve what we get.”

At his Cambridge lectern, speaking in the last years of his life, Trilling identifies the “tremendous moral significance [Scholes] attributes to the new novel” with a philosophical and existential tendency: “the diminished demand it [that moral significance] makes upon the will.”³ Trilling’s essay is nominally about the tradition of the Victorian novel, and specifically about the formation of the concept of “will” therein obtaining, and so in saying this Trilling opposes Scholes’s vision of the twentieth century novel to his vision of the nineteenth. If that were all Trilling said, none of this would be very interesting: a quibble with a then-junior scholar who had picked a fight with Trilling’s *The Liberal Imagination*, an important but by then over twenty-year-old book; a literary argument that Trilling had made different forms many times before.

But he goes on. In the next sentence, Trilling then writes:

Indeed, so great is his estimate of the redemptive power of the structuralist vision that it permits him to speak of the new novel as portending a ‘politics of love,’ thus licensing the hope—did we not make its acquaintance some decades ago, in the program of Stalinist liberalism?—that the conflict of wills may be brought to an end and order made to prevail in the conduct of human affairs. (“AWN,” 513)

In this lecture predominantly about the importance of the concept of the will in the Victorian novel, Trilling directly associates Scholes’s aspirational “structural” political argument with the fellow-traveling “Stalinist liberalism” Trilling had excoriated so many years before in *The Middle of the Journey*, his novel, in the form of Arthur and Nancy Croom. Admittedly Scholes mentions Stalin first in order to defend the policies of the

USSR, in the continuation of a habit that afflicts many of Trilling's late twentieth century critics.⁴ But Trilling focuses his attention on the philosophical ramifications he sees at the intersection of structuralist literary method with politics. Trilling posits Scholes's structuralist vision as the will's major antagonist, a philosophy that—to Trilling, like Stalinism—imagined the extinction of the will in “the conduct of human affairs.” For him, these debates were no mere literary arguments. They staked a claim on human beings' innermost depths.

According to Trilling, the twentieth century's cultural production is marked by two forces: the desire in contemporary art to perform simple countercultural reaction, and bourgeois culture's accelerating ability to defuse this countercultural reaction through absorption. Ultimately, this interaction only leaves one remaining road for art: “the wish to deny the validity of the traditional aesthetic experience,” because only by obliterating the criteria for art could the absorption of shocking new criteria by bourgeois culture be abated. Thus, for these new modes of art and art criticism, “their ultimate goal is to deny the will as we traditionally know it” (“AWN,” 507). Alternately, the criteria for the validity of art could be wholly moved outside of aesthetic judgment into a different domain—into, for example, politics, that path whose intersection with literature Trilling once famously described as a “dark and bloody crossroads.”⁵ Among other things, for Trilling, Stalinism promises freedom from judgment and the difficulty entailed therein. Aesthetic judgment, in literature or art, is but one subset of that judgment.

Trilling's interest in and worry about Stalinism as a cultural and philosophical force is a core component of his reflections on the form of the novel, the nature of reality in literature, and even the development of human social being in the twentieth century. It

also occupies him in his fiction, serving as the major philosophical problem of his novel *The Middle of the Journey*. Stalinist Marxism, in Trilling's eyes, is a philosophy focused on achieving the liberation of all human beings by realizing a dominion of Man (in the most general sense) over the world. Communism itself is simultaneously the means of analyzing that supposed reality, a new rationality, and the engine for bringing that triumph about, with the Communist state as its manifestation. Anything that deviates from Communism's diagnosis or prescription—whether a belief in nature exerting some power over human beings, the future's potential malleability, the private experiences of human beings shared between and with particular other persons, and even the possibility of legitimate, though irresolvable, differences of opinion—impedes the arrival of the promised utopia and must be eliminated to reach human ascension. Stalin himself says as much, developing the thesis that with the proper manipulation of social circumstances by way of dialectics, the course of History can intentionally, and forcibly, be directed by human beings. In this sense, Stalinism is the apotheosis of utopian humanism when given access to the violence of the state.

Across his body of work, Trilling challenges this Stalinist worldview by asserting the ability of human beings “not to acquiesce,” as *The Middle of the Journey's* protagonist John Laskell puts it. That is, to resist the supposed dictates of an inflexible rationality oriented towards a universal *telos*. For Trilling, human beings develop as such through a struggle between will and necessity: the efforts of individual human beings to achieve their ends while constrained by limitations imposed upon them by nature and by other human beings. These experiences of personal and interpersonal development enable individuals to stand against asserted “dictates of history” and the like and not surrender,

even should they eventually be defeated. As Trilling explains it, the power not to acquiesce undermines both Stalinism's assertion of universality and its understanding of the human capacity to direct the course of events, both core pillars of its philosophical force. *The Middle of the Journey*'s John Laskell, in refusing to acquiesce in the face of Gifford Maxim, represents this gargantuan worldview's most threatening enemy.

In this chapter, I will begin with a theoretical discussion of the foundations of Stalin's dialectical materialism, derived through and in extension of key presumptions by both Marx and Lenin regarding the relationship between human labor, dialectics, and reality. I will argue that Stalin's defining mode of reasoning understands the world as fully malleable through the production and manipulation of dialectics, a malleability that can and will realize Communist triumph and, ultimately, the abolition of conflict. In contrast, I contend, Trilling takes issue with presumptions as basic as Marx's contention that the world is intelligible through "labor," that is, human practical activity. Instead, Trilling insists that parts of nature outside the domain of human control matter in the course of human life and are, in fact, the structure that allows human life to have meaning. I will discuss, through investigation of a variety of Trilling's critical writing, how he understands human value operating, and the philosophical and affective flaws he sees in Marxist reasoning on the topic. Finally I will turn to *The Middle of the Journey* to examine Trilling's attempt to dramatize the process by which human growth takes place in conflict against its most harrowing contemporary opponent, the Stalinist drive for power, as manifested in the character of Gifford Maxim. This, I argue, is done through Trilling's staging in his novel of a tragedy separate from the work's overt philosophical

debates, a tragedy that forms the beginning of a “fortunate fall” narrative that buoys John Laskell’s resolution in the face of Maxim: his ultimate refusal to acquiesce.

DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM AS A THEORY OF HUMAN MANIPULATION

The feature Trilling identifies more than any other as the key emotional failing of Stalinist Marxism is the forcing of individuals into a position of helplessness. In the face of the dialectics of History, a person can only find power within this system by ceding individuality to a super-personal entity: typically, the proletariat, and the state as its agent. But the helplessness that so interested Trilling in Stalinism is not limited, for him, to collectivities. When, in *The Middle of the Journey*, Laskell famously envisions Maxim “riding the pendulum” (*MJ*, 333), Trilling uses his metaphor to equate the fellow-travelling Communism of the Crooms to Maxim’s newfound apocalyptic Christianity—and to describe both as stagnant in their interchangeability, juxtaposed against the possibility of “growth.” The qualities of helplessness, stagnation, and the application of force (and specifically state violence) have commonly been associated with Stalinism, though precisely *how* they do is somewhat less intuitive.

Marxism, as originated by Marx himself, presumes that Nature (and by extension the world) is known through human praxis. Any post-Kantian philosophy had to account for the remit of knowledge, since the “Thing-in-itself” [*Ding an sich*] could not be shown to be accessible to the senses. Marx proceeded further in defining knowable phenomena not merely in relation to human sensoria but to *labor*—to “practical activity.” Relatively early in *Capital*, Marx says that “labor [...] is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the

metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself.”⁶ In summarizing Marx’s position on the relationship between labor and nature, Leszek Kołakowski says that for Marx:

[...] nature as we know it is an extension of man, an organ of practical activity. Man, of course, did not create nature and it is not a subjective imagination; but the object of our knowledge is not nature in itself but our contact with it [...] Human praxis is the true object of our knowledge, which can never free itself from the practical, situational manner in which it is acquired. We cannot contemplate the subject in itself, free from historical involvement; the *cogito* is an impossibility. But equally the object cannot be purged of the fact that it presents itself to man in the practical context, as a purely human object.⁷

The bridge between subject and object is crossed through the derivation of both from the force of History. The subject, as Kołakowski argues to be the case for Marx, is bound by the material conditions of its existence—that much is clear from Marxism’s own interpretations of the development of social life. But so too is the object bound by those material conditions. The object only begins to matter at the point it becomes available to human beings specifically as a “human object”: something that can be wholly grasped and controlled within the horizon of the human “practical context.” In this sense, the famous distinction between material “base” and cultural “superstructure” appears in its strongest form, where perception itself appears as a derivative of material conditions.⁸

When, in the “Theses on Feuerbach,” Marx critiques Feuerbach on the grounds that “all mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice,” Marx does literally mean *all* mysteries that can be interpreted in any way as “mislead[ing] theory into mysticism,” right down to questions of what it means to be or what constitutes the world.⁹ The emphasis on *changing* the world as opposed to “interpreting” it emphasizes that working

to change the world is the process of perceiving it; comprehension divorced from practical use is, as Marx says, mysticism. As he says in Thesis 10, “the standpoint of the old materialism is ‘civil’ society; the standpoint of the new is *human* society, or socialized humanity.” To alter the material conditions under which human beings live is the process by which the world, not merely some limited conception of “civil society” but the very ground of human existence itself, is transformed.

For Marx, the changing of material conditions is a process undertaken within human society but enacted through the inevitable resolution of contradictions inherent in the various forms in which humans have organized themselves. “Men make history, but they do not make it just as they please,” Marx writes in his “Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”; “they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past.”¹⁰ Lenin’s key innovation to this aspect of Marx’s argument is the belief that the forces of history can be coordinated, if not yet controlled. The instrument of this power, according to Lenin, is a Communist party: a group of professional revolutionaries whose task it is to properly channel the energies of the proletariat towards the socialist future-to-come.

Though workers constituted the body of the proletariat class, Lenin believed that those workers could not and should not be relied upon to produce the proletariat’s *consciousness*. Across *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin trains his ire on “spontaneity”: a seemingly abstracted philosophical concept that, he argues, has significant political consequences. Lenin writes:

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the only choice is — either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a “third” ideology, and, moreover, in a society

torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above-class ideology). Hence, to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree* means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. There is much talk of spontaneity. But the *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology [...] Hence, our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is *to combat spontaneity, to divert* the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.¹¹

For Lenin, the absence of an empowered proletarian class within capitalism (because, with an empowered proletariat, capitalism would be at best in its waning days, if not in the process of collapse) means that there does not yet exist a proletarian consciousness. Such a consciousness must be constructed, and the only existing ideological framework in which it can be made is within bourgeois ideology. There are two, and *only* two, substantial ideological frameworks: bourgeois ideology and socialist ideology. Any novel “ideology” that emerges can only serve as a derivative of one of these two, and in a bourgeois society, they will tend to shore up bourgeois ideology. The workers, being alienated from their labor, are liable to “spontaneously” develop an ideology (that is, “trade-unionism”) that happens to “strengthen bourgeois ideology” instead of challenging it. As such, spontaneity in Lenin’s eyes is only ever a threat to socialism—a coming of the new that is never really new—and it only serves to confuse the true nature of existing material conditions.

Kołodowski points out that Lenin’s “novelty consisted, in the first place, in his statement that the spontaneous working-class movement must have a bourgeois consciousness, since it could not develop a socialist one, and no other kind existed” (Kołodowski, 667). This principle seems to produce a paradox. Seemingly, for Lenin, the proper political consciousness of the working class could only be held by bourgeois

intellectuals and could only be advanced through their efforts. “The party with its ‘correct’ theoretical consciousness,” as Kołakowski puts it, “embodies proletarian consciousness irrespective of what the real, empirical proletariat may think about itself or about the party” (Kołakowski, 668). Lenin does allow, in a note in the second chapter of *What Is to Be Done?*, that he does not mean to suggest that “workers have no part in creating such a [socialist] ideology.” However, Lenin cautions, “they take part [...] not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians [...] they take part only when they are able, and to the extent that they are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and develop that knowledge.”¹² We have to remember, though, that for Marx “practice” does not and has never limited itself to brute experience. Practice (and its contemporary correlate “praxis”) represent both lived experience and the proper comprehension of it. For Marx, and subsequently for Lenin, to labor is to know—but laboring is not in itself *the same thing* as knowing.

As Leninism developed into and past the October Revolution, the victory of a socialist revolution in the unexpected setting of peasant-agrarian Russia, this basic understanding—that a Communist party is the proper avatar of proletarian consciousness, not any specific group of workers, or even all the workers together—only deepens. Because this consciousness no longer has any dependent connection to the daily experiences of workers (which can be and often are clouded by bourgeois ideology), the remit of socialist understanding broadens beyond simple matters of economy and distribution. Trilling noticed as much even amid the Stalinist period, without the benefit of hindsight. He notes in “The Meaning of a Literary Idea” that contemporary governing parties tend not to observe a distinction between ideas from the realm of what we might

call “policy” and those from the realm of “culture.” He writes that “form in those arts which we call abstract is no less an idea than is form in the representational arts.

Governments nowadays are very simple and accurate in their perception of this [...] and they are as quick to deal with arts of ‘pure’ form as they are to deal with ideas stated in discourse.”¹³ Leninism, in this mold (and Trilling surely had in mind the Soviet Union in this remark) could deal with philosophical and cultural matters with the same bearing that it treated “economic” matters.

Leninism thus could also—in keeping with the breadth of Marx’s own scope—develop theories of historical progression that applied not merely to questions of social order, but to all things. Kołakowski, in summarizing the major ideas of Lenin’s book of philosophy *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* and his posthumously-published *Philosophical Notebooks*, says that Lenin

[...] regarded the dialectic as a universal method that could be expounded, irrespective of object, as a generalized “logic of the world” [...] The dialectic is not merely an assertion that “everything changes,” but an attempt to interpret human knowledge as a perpetual interplay between subject and object, in which the question of the “absolute primacy” of either loses its sharpness.¹⁴ (727)

Dialectical materialism, the basic philosophical foundation of Marxism as interpreted by Lenin and thereafter Stalin, is a fully functional representation of human knowledge itself. The same dialectics that illustrated the rise and eventual fall of capitalism applied everywhere, to every facet of human consciousness and every interaction between subject and object. The substance of a thing—including the all-important internal contradictions that, in Marxism, drive the dialectical process and consequently the engine of History—is, to put it somewhat abstractly, contained within its being, a closed circuit that cannot admit novelty. There is no outside. Everything, no matter how small or seemingly trivial,

was contained within a dialectical logic, within “human knowledge as a perpetual interplay of subject and object.”

Stalin’s evolution out of Lenin’s position, elaborated here, was a version of the same evolution that Lenin made from Marx. Marx posited that, because the world existed for human beings insofar as it was a product of human practical activity, it thereby was the case that human material conditions were the true defining conditions of the world. To change those conditions—through the resolution of their inherent contradictions—was to change the world itself. Lenin went a step further in arguing that the development of those contradictions could itself be manipulated by human agency, specifically through the ideological and organizing force of a Communist party. The material conditions of the proletariat were, after all, realities under the remit of human practical activity and, presumably, could be altered by human practical activity, guided by a proper understanding of how those conditions came to be and how they worked. Marxism purported to be a science rather than a prophecy, after all. And so Lenin could then, through the eyes of Marxism, avow the possibility of understanding all things: because material conditions defined the world, and dialectical materialism allowed for both the understanding and transformation of material conditions based on their inherent qualities, so it followed that dialectical materialism could be applied in order to understand and transform anything. Within all of this framework there is no room for “spontaneity” or any such similar aberration, as these things were only intelligible as mistakes in the absence of a means to incorporate them into a world picture. At worst, they simply represented a guerilla attack on socialism by existing bourgeois ideology.

Dialectical materialism, the key analytical framework of Leninist Marxism, was Stalin's lodestar. For Stalin, dialectical materialism—taking a step further from Lenin—was not merely a mode of analysis, but an instrument of change in and of itself. Even where there was no natural development to analyze and consequently act upon, dialectical materialism could be used to produce transformation. Because dialectical materialism, an interpretative extension of the material conditions of the proletariat, once again fell under the remit of human practical activity, it could therefore be manipulated by human agency. A dialectical movement need not simply happen. It could be *made*—through force.

In September 1938, the Russian state newspaper *Pravda* published over twelve consecutive days a new history of the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution. This history appeared in book form the following month, titled the *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, colloquially known as the *Short Course*.¹⁵ The *Short Course* was a history textbook wrought in Stalin's image and was the single most important book in the Soviet Union for nearly twenty years, governing the understanding of the "Soviet historical experience" in all fields of cultural inquiry. Nearly every Soviet citizen during the Stalin period had some exposure to the book; its circulation exceeded forty million copies in the Soviet Union at the point of its discontinuation during Destalinization in 1956.¹⁶ Though Stalin was historically assigned authorship of the entire book, it was mostly written by an anonymous committee. However, it is generally accepted that Stalin did, in fact, personally author the book's theoretical sections.¹⁷ The most important of these is an essay located in Chapter 4 entitled "Dialectical and Historical Materialism." Stalin's essay is highly derivative,

quoting long passages drawn from Marx, Engels, and Lenin. But it is in this essay that we can begin to understand the nature of Stalin's approach to dialectics and, ultimately, the substance of Trilling's critique.

STALIN'S MARXISM AS A PENDULUM OF CREATION AND DESTRUCTION

Stalin, as to be expected, adheres closely to Lenin on his priors. "Dialectical materialism is the world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party," Stalin begins his essay; he places dialectical materialism immediately in the first position, as the method by which one can properly interpret "the phenomena of the life of society."¹⁸ Stalin's outlook, as is to be expected, depicts nature as a knowable, coherent whole whose shape mirrors the dialectical outlook:

Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics does not regard nature as an agglomeration of things, of phenomena, unconnected with, isolated from, and independent of, each other, but as a connected and integral whole, in which things, phenomena, are organically connected with, dependent on, and determined by, each other [...] dialectics holds that nature is not a state of rest and immobility, stagnation and immutability, but a state of continuous movement and change, of continuous renewal and development, where something is always arising and developing, and something is always disintegrating and dying away. (Stalin, 250)

In more or fewer words, Stalin is saying two things here: first, that nature is "connected and integral," where every phenomena relates to every other phenomena without exception; and second, that nature changes over time. All of this tracks with Lenin's rejection of spontaneity in the *Philosophical Notebooks* and in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*: there can be no novel, spontaneous, or free development if nature is a fully coherent system whose continuous development over time is a product of the resolution of its inner contradictions. Stalin is consistent about the knowability of nature:

he says quite directly that “Marxist philosophical materialism holds that the world and its laws are fully knowable, that our knowledge of the laws of nature, tested by experiment and practice, is authentic knowledge having the validity of objective truth” (Stalin, 256).

What *is* unusual about Stalin’s rendering of the basic point in this passage and in all of his discussion about the constant development of nature is his emphasis on that development being comprised of two complementary, but distinct, parts. Dialectical movement is not simply the transformation of a thing into something else, but a combination of something “arising and developing” and another thing “disintegrating and dying away.” Stalin notably quotes Engels from *Anti-Dühring* making reference to Charles Darwin as an opponent of a “metaphysical conception of nature,” and throughout, Stalin frames dialectical materialism as something resembling a reductive form of evolutionary theory (Stalin, 251). “Dialectics holds that internal contradictions are inherent in all things and phenomena of nature” he writes, reiterating basic Marxist theory, but then he frames this feature of phenomena in terms of a “struggle between the old and the new, between that which is dying away and that which is being born, between that which is disappearing and that which is developing” (Stalin, 252). For Stalin, no dialectical change in nature or History is merely change. Dialectical movement is the struggle between the forces of creation and decay, where the new is tasked with destroying the old.

The idea of the displacement of the old is, it should be said, quite native to Marxism, as it was to capitalism before it. As far back as the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels theorized historical development as proceeding chiefly through battles between “oppressor and oppressed” that each ended “either in a revolutionary re-constitution of

society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”¹⁹ Any program so focused on the inherent, structural contradictions of ideas as a teleological process tends not to leave much room for those ideas surviving their inner conflicts. Stalin’s main departure on this point, as Kołakowski elaborates, is his insistence that “class struggle must become fiercer as the building of socialism progressed.” This phenomenon seems even to extend beyond Stalin’s declaration of the abolition of classes in the Soviet Union—that “there were no classes, but the class struggle was acuter than ever” (Kołakowski, 867). If we were to take this principle on face, as a simple statement about the nature of class antagonism in the transition from capitalism to socialism, it would seem like a paradox. However, Stalin is proposing something much broader here, evident in his use of the language of force: an aping a kind of pseudo-Darwinian “survival of the fittest” ideology with Marxist imagery, where the “class struggle” is not merely a diagnosis of social development, but a law of development *tout court*. Stalin writes:

Further, if the world is in a state of constant movement and development, if the dying away of the old and the upgrowth of the new is a law of development, then it is clear that there can be no “immutable” social systems, no “eternal principles” of private property and exploitation, no “eternal ideas” of the subjugation of the peasant to the landlord, of the worker to the capitalist. (Stalin, 253)

Though much of what Stalin proffers at this point is a repetition of basic Marxist formulae, he places those statements in a derivative position. “There can be no ‘immutable’ social systems” or “eternal principles” of exploitation or the like *because* of a more fundamental major premise—that “the world is in a state of constant movement and development” and that “the dying away of the old and the upgrowth of the new is a law of development.” Not the “social world,” but “the world”; not a “law of social and

historical development,” but a “law of development.” Everything, without exception, falls within the aegis of the dialectical method.

Marx’s original phenomenological schema—that the world exists for human beings through labor, or “human practical activity,” reaches its fullest flowering in Stalin’s dialectical universalism. Everything becomes available to human manipulation within Stalin’s framework. Stalin understands the production of the means of basic survival, for example, as “men carry[ing] on a struggle against nature and utiliz[ing] nature for the production of material values” (Stalin, 262).²⁰ But Stalin goes on: “[...] material values not in isolation from each other, not as separate individuals, but in common, in groups, in societies” (Stalin, 262-63). Throughout “Dialectical and Historical Materialism,” Stalin emphasizes that the agent of human practical activity is never individuals (a concept he repeatedly scorns), but collectivities. Individual human beings, Stalin says, “do not realize, do not understand or stop to reflect [...] but only think of their everyday interests, of lightening their labor and of securing some direct and tangible advantage for themselves” (Stalin, 270). Here, individuals (including proletarians) are not merely constrained by a limiting but dominant bourgeois ideological framework, as was the case for Lenin in *What Is to Be Done?*, but are instead actively malicious, traitorous to the socialist cause except when incorporated into a group. Human beings, for Stalin, only have value in that group context—so much so that he can, ominously, revise the basic socialist dictum of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”²¹ into the principle “He who does not work, neither shall he eat” (Stalin, 268).

The focus on collective existence at the expense of individual existence was a pillar of Soviet ideology under Stalin and served to legitimate Stalin’s emphasis on the

state as the primary dialectical agent. It is as Kołakowski says: the “legality” of the Soviet state was dependent on the ideological belief that “the Soviet Union embodies the interests of all working people and especially the working class everywhere, that it represents their desires and aspirations, and that it is the first step towards a world revolution that will liberate the toiling masses wherever they may be” (Kołakowski, 859). Now in possession of the power of the dialectic—which, again, is the power of creation and destruction of all things—the Soviet state had the ability, within its own worldview, to alter the world as it saw fit. Isaiah Berlin described the programmatic consequence of this role for the state as the creation of the “artificial dialectic.” The “artificial dialectic,” for Berlin, was a process by which Stalin (by way of the state) could direct a dialectical movement between two paired post-revolutionary states, that of “apathy,” or fatigue with the revolutionary process, and “fanaticism,” namely revolutionary terror and the fear it generates:

As others produced artificial rubber or mechanical brains, so he created an artificial dialectic, whose results the experimenter himself could to a large degree control and predict. Instead of allowing history to originate the oscillation of the dialectical spiral, he placed this task in human hands. The problem was to find a mean between the ‘dialectical opposites’ of apathy and fanaticism. Once this was determined, the essence of his policy consisted in accurate timing and in the calculation of the right degree of force required to swing the political and social pendulum to obtain any result that might, in the given circumstances, be desired.²²

Through the use of state power, culture could be forced to oscillate between periods of apathy and periods of fanaticism, wherein specific political results could be achieved and, as an added benefit, new enemies of the state could be made. The production and elimination of these enemies was, both Berlin and Kołakowski note, the ideological point of Stalin’s great purges. In transitioning out of “fanaticism,” purists could be redefined as

“extremists” and purged for their zealotry; in transitioning out of “apathy,” those persons who took advantage of the newly-allowable freedoms could be made to “betray themselves” and their relative independence (Berlin, 102-03; 106-07). These repeated transitions have the effect of stabilizing the state and, moreover, rendering it the sole object of loyalty, wherein “individuals are isolated from one another and become mere instruments in the hands of the state” (Kołakowski, 855).

With this in mind it seems to be no accident that Berlin converges on the same metaphor of the “pendulum” that Trilling so notably uses in *The Middle of the Journey* to describe this movement of the dialectic. In identifying the stagnation of the ideological world Maxim imagines, Trilling seems to have grasped the same idea of fundamental self-“stultifying” at the heart of the “artificially stimulated view[s]” that make up the foundation of Stalinist ideology (Berlin, 104). As both directions of movement in this dialectic are “artificial,” there remains no room for genuine historical development—because nothing remains outside the realm of human practical activity which can enter the system.

Stalin constantly insists on the importance of force in “Dialectical and Historical Materialism.” Near the end of the essay, Stalin describes how, when “new and developing productive forces have reached a proper state of maturity,” the existing bourgeois order “can only be removed by the conscious action of the new classes, by the forcible actions of these classes, by revolution”—new ideas “whose mission is to abolish by force the old relations of production,” through which “the masses become welded into a new political army, create a new revolutionary power, and make use of it to abolish by force the old system of relations of production.” In so doing, Stalin says, “the

spontaneous process of development”—spontaneity once again framed as an enemy—“yields place to the conscious actions of men, peaceful development to violent upheaval, evolution to revolution,” closing this single paragraph (and nearly the entire essay) by reverentially quoting Marx, in *Capital*, saying that “force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one” (Stalin, 272). Besides serving “as a justification of the system of police terror,” as Kołakowski says, Stalin’s repeated insistence on the primacy of force makes evident the artificiality and torpor of the Stalinist worldview (Kołakowski, 868). Without the application of force, nothing of development, of supposed progress, remains. Like the Red Queen of Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland, enormous effort must be expended to stay in the same place.

NECESSITY’S WAGES

In sum, Stalin’s conception of dialectical materialism as he lays it out in the *Short Course* is the third stage of a development in how Marxism understands the relationship between human activity and the world:

- 1.) According to Marx, nature exists for human beings solely through human practical activity, and as such human beings change the world by changing human material conditions through labor.
- 2.) According to Lenin, because the world could be changed through the application of human labor, it could be changed deliberately when that labor was guided by the appropriate consciousness—a “socialist” consciousness developed and applied by a Communist party—and,

thereby, the entire world could be directed towards a certain state through guided dialectical activity.

- 3.) According to Stalin, because it was in principle possible to create a given world through the movement of dialectics, and because human practical activity was the vehicle by which dialectics operated, dialectics were the mechanism by which human beings could mold reality. Any entity with enough power and the proper consciousness—specifically, a Communist state—could create dialectics through force, rather than merely directing them, and thereby alter the world into whatever form it wished.

Stalin's position, all-encompassing as it may be, depends on Lenin's premise to make sense; Lenin's, in turn, depends on Marx's. Though it is not the sufficient condition for the pendulum-like, force-driven artificiality of Stalinist ideology, that original epistemological and ontological presumption of Marx's—that the world exists for human beings through "human practical activity," or labor—is necessary. The Stalinist state cannot fully control the development of History through the creation and manipulation of dialectics, as it aims to do, if there exist things in the world that are *not* available to human manipulation but are significant to human life regardless.

Across his body of work, in his criticism as well as *The Middle of the Journey*, Trilling repeatedly seeks to invoke the importance of the relationship between human beings and nature. In the terms of his Cambridge lecture, that experience is made in the interaction of the twin poles of "will," or the assertion of the individual consciousness, and "necessity," the set of natural constraints on human activity. He does so through two

major contentions. First, Trilling argues that there do exist parts of nature and the world that cannot be subordinated to human activity yet still affect human life, producing situations where human beings are unable to wholly control their circumstances. Second, Trilling contends that these situations are, in fact, the means by which human beings find fulfillment and grow—where, as he says in “Art, Will, and Necessity”—“necessity, in short, made the actual condition of human experience,” and made possible the development of the will (“AWN,” 515). The combination of these two arguments strikes at the heart of the Stalinist dialectical materialism both on epistemological and ontological grounds, as noted before, on the one hand; and on grounds of value, on the other. In the face of assertions of dissent, Stalin’s logic seeks to categorize such expressions as meaningless, insane, or both, falling as they do outside of a logical system that is meant to be a perfect representation of the mechanisms underlying the world. If assertions such as the ones Laskell makes in *The Middle of the Journey* can in fact be taken seriously and interpreted as a pathway to personal growth, development, and the like, they cannot so easily be dismissed.

Trilling’s arguments about the realism of the constraints imposed upon human beings in their social lives by forces from outside, whether we think of them as “nature,” “necessity,” or another equivalent, are career-spanning. As early as his essay on *The Princess Casamassima* in 1950’s *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling insists that “a true knowledge of society comprehends the reality of the social forces it presumes to study,” going on to define tragedy itself as the instance in which that knowledge “knows that sometimes society offers an opposition of motives in which the antagonists are in such a balance of authority and appeal that a man who so wholly perceives them as to embody

them in his very being cannot choose between them and is therefore destroyed.”²³ In this instance, James’s protagonist, Hyacinth Robinson, is placed in such a position by the social forces around him; his ability to define these conditions in advance is, at best, limited, if not nonexistent. Whether we view this argument as “conservative” or not—I don’t think we should—seems many steps beyond Trilling’s immediate goal of asserting what he calls in the same essay “social actuality,” the base conditions under which characters are forced to act, and on what basis they can either flourish or falter—that is, the weight under which they labor (“PC,” 74).

Michaela Bronstein identifies Trilling’s argument as “relatively conservative” in her otherwise excellent 2017 survey of the midcentury reception of James’s novel.²⁴ The portion of Trilling’s essay she cites here comes early, where Trilling claims that *The Princess Casamassima*:

is a novel which has at its very center the assumption that Europe has reached the full of its ripeness and is passing over into rottenness, that the peculiarly beautiful light it gives forth is in part the reflection of a glorious past and in part the phosphorescence of a present decay, that it may meet its end by violence and that this is not wholly unjust, although never before has the old sinful continent made so proud and pathetic an assault upon our affections. (“PC,” 61)

Bronstein understands this passage as forward-facing, the prediction of the coming of revolutionary groups like the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam which either tolerated or endorsed the use of violence. Though Trilling’s understanding of the politics that the novel interrogates *does* apply to groups like the Nation of Islam (I will discuss this at much greater length in my discussion of Baldwin in Chapter 3), it is not merely because such groups sought political change through the use of violence. It is, rather, evident in Trilling’s invocation of the language of rottenness and degeneration that he

means to call to mind an image of Marx. This is evident in the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka's description of Marx, which parallels Trilling's description: "Marx [...] never ceased denouncing the hypocrisy, half-heartedness, irrationality and, most of all, the cynicism and moral chaos unleashed in European societies by the bourgeois-liberal *status quo*."²⁵ Stalinist Marxism's affect for Trilling is defined in large part by its moral asceticism and severity, as well as its belief in a coming new world that would do away with bourgeois decadences like "social actuality."²⁶ Once again, Trilling is not concerned with preserving the model of Europe out of hand—just as he has Laskell do near the end of *The Middle of the Journey*, he takes seriously the claim that it ought to end, perhaps even violently—but he is most concerned about the destruction of the individual will and the consequences for human life that destruction portends.²⁷

Trilling's insistence on the importance of human life and the expression of the individual will's weight often coincides with his sporadic but consistent interest in the work of Sigmund Freud, and especially Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the most thorough expression of which appears near the end of *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Juxtaposing Freud against the inheritors of psychoanalysis of his day (Trilling names Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, F.D. Laing, and some others), he contends that "the informing doctrine of *Civilization and Its Discontents* is that the human mind, in the course of instituting civilization, has so contrived its own nature that it directs against itself an unremitting and largely gratuitous harshness."²⁸ This harshness is not, however, the challenge inherent in life itself; Trilling argues that the book makes a powerful representation of "the fabric of contradictions that Freud conceives human existence to be" as "recalcitrant to preference, to will, to reason; it is not to be lightly manipulated"

(*SA*, 157). Instead, that harshness is the work of a cultural imaginary. For Freud, it is the harshness of the superego, trained against the ego. Attached to this superegoic “ferocity” is a belief about the province of reason: that “it is natural to suppose that if this anomalous condition of human existence can be discovered and described by the rational intellect, it might, by this same agency, be dealt with to the end of controlling its activity and thus bringing about a substantial increase of human happiness” (*SA*, 155). This logical tendency is, of course, the same movement of the intellect that animates the Marxist belief in nature’s responsiveness to human practical activity, at base, and at its height the “bringing to an end the conflict of wills” associated with the Stalinist program of the Western fellow-traveler, as identified in “Art, Will, and Necessity.”

The value of human life’s sense of abrasion is further defined in Trilling’s response to Freud’s supposed inheritors, who for Trilling take up the affective antithesis of the severe Marxist imaginary. These writers, instead of imagining the end of human will through the imposition of order, imagine its disappearance through its becoming meaningless. For Trilling, Marcuse, Laing, Brown, and the like theorize the abolition of constraint, the “negation of limiting conditions in general” (*SA*, 169). While Trilling overstates his case regarding several of these specific writers, particularly Marcuse, his arguments here reflect the same concern for the substantiveness of the human life as lived in society.²⁹ Once again, even in this seemingly disparate worry regarding certain psychological writers of the 1950s and 60s, he sees the tendrils of Marx: the “projected curve of ensuing mental change” postulated by Marcuse “points to the end of ‘alienation,’ to the realization of the young Marx’s envisioned state of freedom in which all human activity is gratuitous” (*SA*, 163). For Trilling, neither the abolition of the self in Spirit nor

the “great refusal of human connection” (*SA*, 171) he sees in the thinking of 1950s and 1960s radical authenticity allow human life to be meaningful. On the one hand is an assumption of totality, of a responsibility for everything and everyone borne by all equally, blended as they are in the current of History. On the other is the end of responsibility, the trivialization of consequences and of development by the rejection of limiting conditions. Only the ongoing tension of the individual’s self-definition with and against society, the struggle to live it day to day—the substance of “narration, of telling stories”—gives substance, for him, to human meaningfulness (*SA*, 134).

Sincerity and Authenticity ends with an image of what it understands that struggle to be, inflected through the lens of Christ:

The falsities of an alienated social reality are rejected in favour of an upward psychopathic mobility to the point of divinity, each one of us a Christ—but with none of the inconveniences of undertaking to intercede, of being a sacrifice, of reasoning with rabbis, of making sermons, of having disciples, of going to weddings and to funerals, of beginning something and at a certain point remarking that it is finished. (*SA*, 171-72)

In its drive to surpass all limitations and fully free the human spirit from constraint, the writers Trilling targets, as he understands them, seek to transform human beings into gods, each becoming Christ the divine. Trilling tries to emphasize the opposite: that even Christ, a god, was still a man, and that the significance of the story of his life is made out of the “inconveniences” of his existence on the mortal plane and, in the end, his mortality. Christ, for Trilling, matters as a divine being who chose to live in society as a human being, choosing to be limited by the conditions of human life and working through them. For Marx, conversely, these constraints are unconscionable limits on human freedom. That freedom, as Trilling understands Marx to contend, can only be

achieved, and human beings brought to their apotheosis, when struggle is finished, suffering brought to an end, and want abolished.³⁰

The depth of Hyacinth Robinson's inner conflict, even in light of his ultimate fate, for Trilling presents an alternative to the quietist desire for conflict's end and the Stalinist-adjacent, self-abnegating will represented by the Princess, who for Trilling is "the very embodiment of the modern will which masks itself in virtue, making itself appear harmless, the will that hates itself and finds its manifestations guilty and is able to exist only if it operates in the name of virtue, that despises the variety and modulations of the human story and longs for an absolute humanity, which is but another way of saying a nothingness" ("PC," 91-92). Trilling goes so far as contend that:

Hyacinth's death, then, is not his way of escaping from irresolution. It is truly a sacrifice, an act of heroism. He is a hero of civilization because he dares do more than civilization does: embodying two ideals at once, he takes upon himself, in full consciousness, the guilt of each. He acknowledges both his parents. By his death he instructs us in the nature of civilized life and by his consciousness he transcends it. ("PC," 86)

If there is any remedy to Europe's "passing over into rottenness," as Trilling argues is part of the novel's thematic interest, it is in what he calls Hyacinth's "heroism," his willingness to endure his inner conflict instead of running from it, as we might otherwise assume. Defining Hyacinth in this way puts him in the terms Trilling used to discuss Keats: those of "negative capability," where, in Keats's own words, "a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason."³¹ As in Hyacinth's case, the life of a hero, which is lived in negative capability, is a life fully and meaningfully lived in society—a form of life that Trilling claims has become scarce in his era, his contemporary "ideological age." The hero's activity reaches the point of "tragic salvation, the soul accepting the fate that defines it," a movement that

curiously extends slightly past conventional definitions of tragedy and leaves room for something more in its wake, something that emerges from tragic experience (“Poet,” 257). If we can understand Trilling’s arguments regarding heroism as the semblance of a moral philosophy, it draws parallels to Christine Korsgaard’s arguments about the nature of moral realism, where she claims that “reflection reveals to us that the normativity of our values springs from the fact that we are animals of a certain kind, autonomous moral animals. That is, in the Aristotelian sense, our human form.”³² For Trilling, as for Korsgaard, value springs from the acceptance of the human form, particularly those parts that bind it to the Earth, the animal parts, and the limitations under which it is able to realize itself alongside others. The rejection of those earthly parts of the human form, those more like animals, is an important component of Leon Trotsky’s vision of what “man” could become, as I will examine in the next chapter.

This moral argument is the substance of Trilling’s unusual parallel, drawn in “The Poet as Hero,” between the ethical imaginations of Shakespeare and Franz Kafka. Shakespeare, Trilling argues, has no less a vision of “man’s suffering and cosmic alienation” than Kafka. He describes Shakespeare’s understanding of the world as “that prison cell which Pascal says the world is,” claiming that “Shakespeare no less than Kafka forces upon us the cruel irrationality of the conditions of human life, the tale told by an idiot, the puerile gods who torture us not for punishment but for sport.” But, Trilling says, Shakespeare reveals something different in his version of the cell of the world. “In Shakespeare’s cell the company is so much better than in Kafka’s; the captains and kings and lovers and clowns of Shakespeare are alive and complete before they die” (“Poet,” 250). What differentiates Shakespeare from Kafka here, according to Trilling, is

that “the sense of evil” present in the world is in some sense “contradicted” by a sense of personal identity. The literary effect is clear, even on a passing brush: the characters of Shakespeare have presence; their lives in the context of the plays they inhabit mean something distinctive, in spite of—or perhaps even enhanced by—their deaths, in the case of the tragedies (which seem to be the works of interest here.) By contrast, the personages of Kafka, if it’s even right to call them that, have “been stripped of all that is becoming to a man except his abstract humanity, which, like his skeleton, never is quite becoming to a man.” Trilling is describing in Kafka the emergence of a kind of bare life, to borrow the Agambenian term—a form he links directly with the concept of “abstract humanity,” which he had explicitly identified in the character of Christina Light, the Princess, in James’s novel and seen as the final goal of Stalinist reasoning and dialectical materialism applied to human social life. This abstracting drive takes form in another character, Gifford Maxim, to which is opposed a version of the human experience as Trilling views it most fruitfully lived in the form of John Laskell in his novel, *The Middle of the Journey*. The staging of this debate in that novel shows how the experience of life lived under the weight of necessity can produce resistance to attempts to drive away the will. We turn to that novel now.

THE CALDWELLS’ TALE

The Middle of the Journey is an odd novel. It’s quite talky—much of it involves long discussions of literature and philosophy in a trailer parked on the property of a vacation house in the Connecticut woods—but isn’t by any means exclusively a philosophical tract. It is, properly, a novel of ideas. There is the staged debate that takes

up many of the novel's pages: between John Laskell, the vaguely liberal protagonist (he has an unspecified job in housing policy in New York City); the ex-Communist Gifford Maxim, an explicit stand-in for Whittaker Chambers; the fellow-traveling Arthur and Nancy Croom; and, to a significantly more minor extent, the magazine editor Kermit Simpson, who professes allegiance to "Jeffersonian ideas" but seems to have little of a distinctive intellectual position (*MJ*, 231). The novel's major climax seems like it might as well be bodiless, taking place as it does purely in discussion between Laskell and Maxim next to the parked trailer. But it is still a *novel*, a form that Trilling went to great pains in his critical career to understand. It deals in "the hum and buzz of implication [...]" the whole evanescent context in which its explicit statements are made," that is in the work of social realism, as Trilling explains to be the province novel at the height of his career in "Manners, Morals, and the Novel."³³ It also, as Trilling understands the nineteenth-century version of the form he defends at his career's end in "Art, Will, and Necessity," is concerned with the "physiology and hygiene of the will," specifically the individual will ("AWN," 502). But the importance of *The Middle of the Journey*'s being a novel, I argue, is at least in part far simpler: it has a plot, containing a beginning, a middle, and an end. That plot is mostly about the neighbors.

That plot roughly goes as follows: Laskell, recovering from the recent death of his partner and his own unexplained near-death, is invited by his friends the Crooms to summer at their vacation home in the northern part of Connecticut. While staying with the Crooms and having a variety of discussions of grand importance with them and an old college friend, Maxim, who is also visiting and who has recently "broken" with the Communist Party, taking up evangelical, quasi-apocalyptic Christianity in place of his

Bolshevism, he meets the Crooms' handyman and his family. Duck Caldwell, a perpetual drunk, has a wife, Emily, who feels purposeless in her life, and a daughter, Susan, who displays unusual intelligence and whom Emily wants to send to a good women's college. Partway through the novel, Laskell attempts to help Susan work on her performance for an upcoming local talent show, a reading of William Blake's poem "Jerusalem," and has sex with Emily during an intimate moment beside a river. On the night of the talent show, Susan performs her recitation but gets stuck on the line "We will not cease from Mental Fight," the line on which Laskell spent the most time rehearsing with her, and forgets the subsequent line. From the audience, Laskell gives her a cue, and she completes the recitation. However, Duck Caldwell, who had also been in the audience, goes up to Susan and, in a moment of drunken rage, calls her a "disgrace" and slaps her hard across the face (*MJ*, 283). Unbeknownst to Duck, but known to Laskell—Emily had told him, but not her husband—Susan has a congenitally weak heart, and Duck's slap causes her to go into shock and die in front of the audience. Duck runs off and Laskell chases him; they struggle over a knife; Duck is subdued and put in custody. In the following final pages of the novel, the characters attend Susan's funeral, Laskell and Maxim have several arguments in and beside the trailer on the Crooms' property, Duck is released from custody, and Laskell returns to the city.

In summarizing the novel's plot, I always find myself struck by how little any of the high-concept discussions that characterize most readings of this novel seem to matter to any action that happens. These discussions are important—extraordinarily so—to understanding the novel's goals. But Maxim, perhaps the most verbose character in this very verbose work, has next to no effect on the story itself, despite being Laskell's main

ideological adversary and being physically present for the vast majority of the novel.³⁴ On the rare occasions when he's obligated to be around characters other than Laskell, Kermit, or the Crooms, he pointedly stares into corners and refuses to participate, as he does when he makes it very clear that he is "not concerned in this affair" when Laskell and Kermit go to the town treasurer and attempt to pay for Susan's grave-plot (*MJ*, 305). To the extent that we can think (somewhat reductively) of *The Middle of the Journey* having two "halves," its intellectual half and its narrative half, they tend not to intersect. They of course sometimes do: particularly when some happening or other becomes the instigation for a larger debate, usually by virtue of Maxim hijacking the conversation and taking it far beyond its original scope. But more consistently the two "parts" of the novel come together in the character of John Laskell himself. Laskell is the novel's bridge between its events and its discussions—in the blending of his experience with his ideas.

Near the very end of the novel, after Susan's death and before his climactic debate with Maxim, Laskell gazes at a bowl he purchased from Emily Caldwell. Having initially interpreted it as naïve handicraft at the point of purchase, in this moment, Laskell now notices the bowl to be "very dark in its conception" (*MJ*, 324). Its "unhappy design" conveys to Laskell this dark character, signifying the "depths below the bright humanistic surface that he did not know about"—both in the character of the bowl and the character of its maker. The bowl conveyed Emily's "deep awareness of nullity, her knowledge of darkness" (*MJ*, 325). But then, after first seeing it as a product of innocence and then as a record of some kind of inner tragedy, he registers it for a third time. The bowl's character changes to Laskell's mind once again, now bringing forth the "awkwardness of the design," but this time in "the pride that Emily had taken in her work" (*MJ*, 325). At this

point, Laskell tells us that “he knew, now that he thought he understood the meaning of the abstract design of the bowl, at what cost that spiritedness had been won and on what her authority was grounded.”

The concept of *cost* is the key interpretative term. Spiritedness is purchased with knowledge of darkness. There is darkness below the humanism, yes, but at the same time the humanism was placed outside and around it, obscuring it, presenting that—and only that—face to the outside world, knowing that the darkness taken for itself would not be fit to show. It is in a sense a dialectic, but a real one, manifest in three parts: innocence, then tragedy, then growth. The bowl, an aesthetic product of Emily’s labor, replicates the progression of her inner life, a progression wrought of experience within time and in the face of the reality of the constraints she faced in her life—not the sort of thing that can be produced through a Stalinesque dialectical sleight-of-hand. Emily’s suffering, far from being a source of “useless” pain, to borrow Emmanuel Levinas’s language, is the condition by which her distinctive individual personality develops.³⁵

Luckily, we need not look far for theoretical language to accommodate this structure. In 1955 (eight years following *The Middle of the Journey*), the Americanist scholar and biographer R.W.B. Lewis presented the simple-yet-functional concept of the “fortunate fall” as part of his archaeology of the figure of the “new Adam” in nineteenth-century American letters. The fortunate fall, for Lewis, is the idea that “in order to enter the ranks of manhood, the individual (however fair) had to *fall*, had to pass beyond childhood in an encounter with ‘Evil,’ had to mature by virtue of the destruction of his own egotism.”³⁶ Lewis’s gendered language and the specifically religious focus of his exact formulation aside, the idea he presents here maps reasonably well onto the threefold

movement of Emily's bowl. An original state of innocence gives way to a tragic fall, wherein that innocence is damaged or "destroyed" in a symbolic sense by exposure to ruin: the "awareness of nullity" or the "knowledge of darkness." But what Lewis's formulation allows that a traditional understanding of tragedy does not is the third transition, the "fortunate" part of the "fortunate fall." The moment of tragedy is not the end. Rather, the experience of that tragedy—the survival of it—enables growth, development, and strength. The cost—the tragic experience—has been paid, and so emerges "spiritedness" and "authority," as Laskell identifies in the design of Emily's bowl. Furthermore, there is no way to proceed to this moment through reason or logic. A fall is a trajectory, an action, a movement downward from one place to another. The mind alone cannot simulate the fall; the entire person must experience it, with all its attendant costs and sacrifices.

The tragedy of the Caldwells, at first blush, does not seem to have this final moment of resolution. Susan is, of course, dead; and, as the town treasurer says when Laskell and Kermit go to purchase her plot, Emily is drowned in "grief" and Duck in "guilt" (*MJ*, 308-09). Only Laskell, the last participant in their story, remains to be the site of this third movement. He is the last remaining character who understands it through experience, rather than observation. Curiously enough, later in *The American Adam*, Lewis identifies Herman Melville's posthumously-discovered novella *Billy Budd* as the point in Melville's body of work where a voice (first identified with *Moby-Dick's* Ishmael) "which transfigures the anger and sees beyond the sickness and the evil"—that is, the voice of the third movement of the "fortunate fall"—"become[s] transcendent and victorious" (Lewis, 146). In *The Middle of the Journey*, the first moment when Laskell

begins to understand the centrality of experience to true understanding, as well as to first grasp the truth of Gifford Maxim's ideology, is in his reflections on Maxim's hackneyed, Christianized reading of *Billy Budd* (*MJ*, 173-75).³⁷ Rather than attending to the logic of Maxim's reading, routed through invocations of concepts like Law and Spirit, Laskell smells in the argument "the odor of corruption," beginning to react in terms of feelings—like "nausea" and "repulsion"—rather than reasoned counterarguments (*MJ*, 175). Ultimately, Laskell comes to view Maxim's reading of *Billy Budd* in personal terms, "as proof that Maxim had thrown over all his aims and hopes." Laskell comes to understand Maxim as abusing reason in order to split his odds: between a "Maxim who really believed this," on the one hand, and "a Maxim who pretended to believe it because he thought he would be safer if he made clear and absolute his difference with the Party" (*MJ*, 176). Maxim, throughout the novel, is demonstrated to be exceptionally good at manipulating logic in this way, able to twist language as needed in order to validate certain arguments—a close parallel to Stalin's production of "artificial" dialectics, as Berlin puts it, to produce desired outcomes. Laskell's response here represents, in brief, a form of reply that lies outside of Maxim's domain, one that no amount of logical contrivance can materially undermine.

To more completely understand the process of Laskell's development via the tragedy of the Caldwells, and how that ultimately affects the nature of his arguments in his final confrontation with Maxim, we now need to look at the events of the novel immediately following Susan's death.

THOUGHT AND FEELING: LASKELL'S REFLECTIONS ON RESPONSIBILITY

Duck runs out of the church where the talent show had been taking place, and Laskell follows him. Trilling does not immediately explain why Laskell chases Duck—nor does he, for the rest of the novel, give any sort of explicit answer to the question. Laskell himself seems to develop some internal idea of what he had intended to do—if he is meant to have intended anything at all, its own open question—but he only does so after chasing Duck into the pre-twilight. Laskell calls to Duck, and Duck pulls himself out of a bush. Trilling notes in an unusual construction that Duck's "clean white shirt was very clear in the twilight; at that distance Laskell could not see the stain of blood on it" (*MJ*, 286). This description creates both a paradox—Duck's shirt is somehow both clean and bloodstained—as well as an understanding shared between Trilling's authorial voice and the reader, from which Laskell is excluded. At this point in their confrontation, Laskell cannot see the bloodstain, the symptom of a bad shaving job but here rendered into some kind of symbol for what Duck had done to his daughter; Trilling gives the reader access to whatever symbolic function the blood is supposed to fill before Laskell perceives it. Laskell, at this point, comes to an initial decision of what he intends to do: he will attempt to reason with Duck that he did not, in fact, kill Susan when he struck her across the face and she died. Trilling presents Laskell's decision regarding this approach as initially bizarre. Trilling notes that Laskell's "heart," in calling out to Duck, "was pounding with the high excitement of what he was about to do," and he reflects on his intended logic "with a gleam of pride in his practicality" (*MJ*, 286-87). Twice in two pages Trilling frames Laskell's thought process as ultimately selfish, an expression of

smug self-satisfaction in his own cleverness in seeming to resolve a harrowing situation through the sheer force of logic.

All of this seems to work fine in Laskell's head, as Trilling describes it, but at the moment of proairesis—when the words actually leave Laskell's mouth and arrive at Duck's ears, their delivery irreversible—Laskell is made to understand the absurdity of his thinking, the same absurdity evident to the reader from the moment Trilling describes the idea.³⁸ He writes:

Laskell said, "It's not what you think. She's dead, but it wasn't you that killed her."

It was not a very enlightening way to put it. It was like telling a riddle to a man in great danger. And Duck, his mind made up and very clear about what had happened, naturally did not hear the phrase that exempted him from guilt.

Laskell tried again. "She had a weak heart," he said.

But the statement seemed as weak as Susan's heart. It seemed ridiculous to run after a man who had killed his daughter to tell him she had a weak heart. And if Duck heard the statement at all, it seemed to enrage him. (*MJ*, 287)

Ridiculous, indeed, but the argument that Laskell had resolved to make to Duck at this moment of high drama only—though immediately—sounds so to him as soon as he verbalizes it, forced to hear in the context of the existing world the ideas of which he had been so proud in his head. Trilling's description brooks no quarter on entertaining the validity of these ideas, either. The narrator calls the idea both "not very enlightening" and "weak," on top of flatly asserting the reality this train of reasoning was meant to deny: that Duck had "killed his daughter." Duck, for his part, seems to be unreceptive to even hearing what Laskell has to say. The narrator, once again, lets the reader access something that Laskell cannot: the inside of Duck's mind, though only for a moment, to

reassure us that Duck was certain both of the events that had just unfolded and of his guilt. The feeling of guilt, of course, is a feeling, not a logical conclusion. The intensity of the feeling that Duck displays here—he keeps screaming for Laskell to “keep away from me,” and even threatens him with an admittedly dull and useless pocket knife—renders absurd the idea that it could be instantly and completely evaporated simply by thinking about the abstract causality of the situation in a different way.

In the face of Duck’s rejection, Laskell falls into a rage, “a desire to blast and blight this man” (*MJ*, 287). Part of this the narrator attributes to Laskell matching the furious energy put out by Duck, but ultimately, it seems *not* to have anything directly to do with Duck’s killing Susan, at least not facially. Instead, Laskell’s anger comes from a feeling of impotence, the inaccessibility of Duck to the train of reasoning he persuaded himself to believe insurmountable. Laskell specifically understands the idea of which he is attempting to convince Duck—the displacement of guilt onto the condition of Susan’s heart—first as an “exemption” from guilt, and then second, and more forcefully, as “salvation that was being offered him” (*MJ*, 287). The proffering of salvation, of course, is traditionally understood to be the province of God (or some other equivalent deity) alone. As such, the delusion of grandeur the narrator shows Laskell attaching to this seemingly clever idea he came up with is fully revealed for what it is, something subtly evident from the first moment the text mentions Laskell’s “high excitement.” At this moment, Laskell briefly seems to believe—and at least unconsciously seems to feel—that access to a particular set of conclusions born of reason (in this case, the causal, scientific conclusion that Susan’s death was the result of the frailty of her heart, rendering Duck’s attack inconsequential as a matter of “fault”) permits him to offer exemption and

salvation. That is, that it lets him be a god, using the movement of intellect to transform the world in an intentional direction, precisely the logic of Stalin's dialectical materialism.

The narrative does not allow Laskell to linger here long, as Duck lunges at him with the knife, the two struggle, and they are separated. Laskell begins to second-guess the way he had been thinking about responsibility shortly afterwards, in the midst of another argument he had been baited into by Maxim. As Maxim tries to get Laskell to agree to the proposition that Laskell was responsible for Susan's death as part of a highly abstracted acceptance of the universality of sin—"because we are all members one of the other" (*MJ*, 295)—Laskell thinks to himself about responsibility. He begins to think about all the possible paths of causality that might have led to Susan's death—his intervention in the reading of her poem; Emily's initial teaching Susan an "absurd 'expressive'" recitation style; the Crooms' fetishistic "infatuation" with Duck as the prototypical worker in their political imagination. He reflects further:

There was no logic in it, or perhaps there was too much logic in it. It went back, for that matter, beyond Duck [...] Maybe it went back to Elizabeth's death, and even beyond Elizabeth's death—to his comfortable willingness not to be married to her, not to have *that* responsibility, which, in turn, meant that when she died there had been no way for him to realize and to express his grief, for he had not realized the relation with her, so that only Maxim had been available to him as anything like a comforter, and Maxim's company the only sign of grief, with the result that Maxim had established his ground for that future "claim." He gave it up, it was getting too involved. When something involved so many things so tenuously, then it was impossible to think about it as responsibility. One could no longer *think* about it at all, one could only feel. (*MJ*, 296-967)

For Laskell at this moment, in the wake of his cascading thoughts, thought itself falters before feeling. In this case, that feeling seems to be grief, emerging once again alongside guilt as one of the major thematic elements of this last portion of the novel—specifically,

Laskell's unresolved grief over the death of his partner, Elizabeth. The lack of a structure in their relationship (their not being married) leaves Laskell no intelligible way to grieve Elizabeth's loss. Nature and forces outside of his control robbed him of the person he loved most. Because he had been comfortable not being married to her—that is, not paying a cost, making a kind of sacrifice—he then was denied a well-worn outlet for his grief (being a widower), leaving him in a complicated position he had to work through for himself. Grief, a feeling, becomes the ground of Laskell's sense of responsibility—his deferred responsibility for Elizabeth, which he seems to displace onto Susan and Emily Caldwell. His response is to attempt to take responsibility for something that is manifestly not his fault—Susan's death—and, failing that making sense, trying to fill the hole with logic.

The beginning and end of this passage pairs neatly in its understanding of “logic.” Trilling juxtaposes “thinking” and “feeling” against one another, as if feeling could not exist alongside thinking in any form. But in *The Liberal Imagination*, as early and as directly as in its introduction, Trilling says that “between sentiments and ideas there is a natural connection so close as to amount to a kind of identity,” wherein one can become the other and vice-versa, and that this connection also joins literature and politics.³⁹ It's important to note that Laskell only divides thinking from feeling in a moment of exhaustion, after having suffered through Susan's death, his confrontation with Duck, and most immediately the cacophony of attempts to understand in his own head. None of his attempts to draw a logical connection between some past event and the tragedies he had experienced were sufficient to the complexity of his grief, tinged as it is with guilt, because he tries to justify: he tries to overcome feeling with reason, instead of letting the

two coexist. In this sense, Trilling's equation of "no logic" and "too much logic" ends up being correct, as they ultimately amount to the same thing.

Late in *The Liberal Imagination*, in the essay "The Meaning of a Literary Idea," Trilling distinguishes what he calls "ideology" from "ideas." "Ideology,"⁴⁰ for Trilling, is "the language of non-thought [...] developing from the peculiar status which we in our culture have given to abstract thought" ("MLI," 285). He reiterates less than a page later that "ideology" is "not the product of thought," existing outside of how he understands thinking and, specifically, ideas, but rather is "the habit or the ritual of showing respect for certain formulas to which, for various reasons having to do with emotional safety, we have very strong ties of whose meaning and consequences in actuality we have no clear understanding" ("MLI," 286). Certain formulas like, for example, the understanding of responsibility, which Laskell realizes he is trying to avoid truly understanding in relation to Elizabeth's death. Both his insistent attempts to expand the sphere of responsibility, abstracting it beyond all comprehension, *and* his final exhaustion serve the same function: they are attempts to achieve "emotional safety," to escape the difficulty of his grief. In the first instance, he tried to generate a simplistic chain of causality that would exempt him from his suffering. In the second, he simply "gave it up," turning away from it and hoping for an unearned salvation. In this moment of realization, Laskell finally comes face-to-face with his grief, identifying it for what it is and beginning to feel the pain of his loss—a loss made more painful by his earlier comfort. He is beginning to let feeling and thought co-mingle. This leap is what allows him to free himself from Maxim.

MAXIM, HIS MASK, STALIN, AND THE REFUSAL TO ACQUIESCE

Laskell is having these thoughts, of course, in the middle of an argument with Maxim, his foil and the text's major source of intellectual conflict. Maxim, as Trilling makes explicit in his book's introduction, is meant to be a direct corollary for Whittaker Chambers, a former Communist agent turned Christian with a certain flair for self-aggrandizement (*MJ*, vii-viii).⁴¹ Nearly the entire introduction, in fact, is about Chambers, both showing the influence of Chambers on the development of the plot and specifically denying that the novel was meant to be a *roman à clef* for the Hiss Case, the House Un-American Activities Committee-led investigation and indictment of a semi-prominent government official on charges of perjury related to potentially being a Soviet asset, a story in which Chambers had been intimately involved and for which he was the main government witness (*MJ*, viii).⁴² Curiously enough, Maxim was not present in Trilling's first concepts for the work, which he had thought would be "about death—about what had happened to the way death is conceived by the enlightened consciousness of the modern age" (*MJ*, xii). But as the character of Maxim emerged and wormed himself into the story Trilling was trying to tell, that original remit changed. Maxim was his own center of gravity, the force that causes *The Middle of the Journey* to have the political stakes that it does. And Maxim does this not as a villain, at least not purely. As Trilling recalls, the character of Chambers was useful to his book in part because he "brought to it, along with reality, a sizable amount of nonsense, of factitiousness of feeling and perception." Calling Chambers (and thus Maxim) a "tragic comedian," Trilling goes on to concretize his vision of the character as a kind of blackly allegorical cartoon: "the frequency with which Chambers verged on the preposterous, the extent to

which that segment of reality which he really did possess was implicated in his half-inauthentic profundities made him admirably suited to my purpose” (*MJ*, xxii-xxiii). Preposterous, yes, inauthentic, yes; but also in some way tragic, at least to Trilling’s eyes, if not his own. The extremity of his political and moral positions throughout the novel is the point. Maxim’s ridiculousness only becomes evident when one can escape the vortex of his reasoning.

Laskell’s meditation on responsibility takes place during a rare quiet moment in their conversation, a brief lull brought on by Laskell refusing to accept that guilt is universal, that “we are all members one of the other,” using language cribbed from St. Paul (*MJ*, 295). Laskell’s refusal to play along leaves Maxim uncharacteristically speechless, with Laskell feeling like he failed to give Maxim something that he was looking for. After the lull, he goes on, asking Laskell if he “forgives” Duck, making explicit and endorsing the logic that Laskell had at the moment of his confrontation with Duck, the logic that he had just worked himself through: “In the way that if we are all members of one another, then each of us is in some part God” (*MJ*, 297). Just as with Duck’s earlier response, this statement from Maxim sends Laskell into a rage, though one that quiets itself immediately through its own expression—the first sign of a transition in Laskell’s approach between that moment and this. Laskell begins to understand, just as he had begun to do earlier in his engagement with Maxim’s article about *Billy Budd*, that there was something beneath Maxim’s argument, something non-rational animating the way he was pressing and needling Laskell. He realizes—Trilling frames it that Laskell suddenly “knew”—that “Maxim was guilty of the death of someone.” Bizarrely, without any actual exchange of words, Maxim begins to move his body, as if possessed:

[...] the next moment, Maxim held out both his great bearlike hands, the palms up. The fingers were crisped a little and held far apart from each other as if they must not touch each other, just as each hand must not touch the other or any part of Maxim. He did not look at his hands, as if they were filthy and dripping. He looked at Laskell as he said, "It won't wash off, I find. Not all the perfumes of Arabia, not all the oil of Persia can sweeten this little hand." The facetiousness of his calling his hand little was desperate. Maxim's face was breaking up. First there was a look on it of final weariness, masklike weariness, and then the mask began to twitch. The eyes shifted from side to side, looking for a way out. It was terrible to see. (MJ, 298-99)

Maxim here is lightly amending *Macbeth*, quoting Lady Macbeth's unconscious self-incriminatory ramblings during a sleepwalking episode near the play's end.⁴³ With this in mind, it is possible for the reader to understand at least the first half of this passage as preposterous, a "half-inauthentic profundity," as Trilling had said about Chambers. Maxim's revulsion towards his hands, to the extent that he made them seem as if they were "filthy and dripping," is an attempt to briefly ape Lady Macbeth, playing up his own performative expression of guilt as a former Communist. Nearer the end of this conversation, Maxim says as much. But regardless of whether we perceive Maxim's seeming intent, Laskell does not. His understanding of Maxim's words as "facetious" makes evident that Laskell does not immediately know the source of the words. But Laskell's failure to understand Maxim's play at this moment has an unexpected effect: he can avoid being trapped in Maxim's performance and is thus able to see the true fragility of his philosophy. The simile of Maxim's "masklike weariness" literalizes into a mask separate from the face underneath. And then, in one of the novel's more potent moments of horror, that mask begins to "twitch," as if it's alive and sentient, separate from a real Maxim underneath. "The eyes," presumably this real Maxim's, "shifted from side to side, looking for a way out" of this living mask bearing down on the face wearing it, a weight

that, at least to Laskell's interpretation, seems unbearable, even "terrible." It casts Maxim's role in the novel into a new light, even after paragraphs and pages of Maxim talking: the horror of what he represents, the pain and suffering Laskell interprets Maxim to be inflicting on himself. He is, once again, able to escape Maxim by stepping outside the remit of Maxim's train of "thought," if it's even right to call it that, representative as it is of what for Trilling is "ideology."

Maxim's subtle self-mutilation, as Laskell begins to see it, in this moment is what makes comprehensible his ends as they are expressed at the end of the novel—as well as how Laskell is able to answer them, by way of his realizations and his growth. Maxim, Laskell understands, only cares for power. Power, it seems to Laskell, might be the only thing that allows Maxim to subdue the violence taking place between his mask and his face; power can dispose of complication, of suffering, of the mediation born of experience. As they enter their final debate, Laskell sees "the great executive force that lay behind Maxim's expression of his view of the nature of guilt and responsibility [...]. The time was getting ripe for a competing system. And it would be brought by the swing of the pendulum, not by the motion of growth. Maxim was riding the pendulum" (*MJ*, 332-33). Maxim, for all his performative guilt over his Communist past, has changed in no way. He merely seems to have decided that Marxism had lost its power to compel the hearts and minds of people, and that Christianity, in whatever bizarre, extremist form Maxim professes it, will take its place. Not through a motion of growth; there is no development here, for that would entail the paying of costs, suffering, and experience. Instead, the way of thinking that Maxim represents simply swings along with the pendulum of History, displacing itself into new images and new vocabulary. As the rest

of this book will explore, Trilling was not wrong to see what Maxim stands for, his pursuit of power through a form of moral asceticism, become mobile, moving from one system of belief to another.

What Maxim represents, the mode of thinking he displays throughout *The Middle of the Journey*, is essentially Stalin's view of the power of dialectics. In an essay written near the end of his life, Trilling summarizes what he believes to be the basic principles of a Marxist system of interpretation. This system, Trilling argues, is foremost "characterized by its intransigent confidence in the category of causation," wherein "contingency can indeed be reduced to stable and universal principles, that nothing in culture need be attributed to chance."⁴⁴ Marxism is intended to be a *scientific* socialism, after all, and, as such, Trilling identifies in its epistemology an iron logic, wherein, as Lenin wrote, there is no room for spontaneity, no role for anything that escapes the grasp of human comprehension. Further, as Stalin argued, if Marxism as a system of thought could eliminate chance, spontaneity, unpredictability, and difference, if it could imagine a world that was wholly knowable through the application of human power, "predictions" would cease to be predictions, instead becoming prophecy. If the future could be known, it could be controlled.

Yet Laskell, by virtue of all his suffering, the elaboration of the intermixed guilt and grief at the heart of his experience in *The Middle of the Journey*, and the realization he makes of it through his experience of the Caldwells, enables him to become something unpredictable, even in a small way. At the height of their argument, Maxim ventriloquizes the Crooms, turning them into representatives of a Communist system equal to him as a representation of his apocalyptic Christianity, each serving as an

opposing point on the arc of the pendulum, two antagonistic forces that culture would swing between on its supposed road of progress towards “the new world,” as Maxim calls it (*MJ*, 337). In this new world, there is no room for moderation—no room for John Laskell. Kermit Simpson and Nancy Croom both call Maxim “crazy” and “insane,” but Laskell says that he is not—he is the only one that understands Maxim’s will to power and the force of his desire to escape his own inner torment. But Laskell, at the same time, is unwilling to accept a reality formed in this way, one that crushes the world into an object subject wholly to human whim in order to guarantee a stultifying “emotional safety.” “An absolute freedom from responsibility—that much of a child none of us can be,” Laskell summarizes his ethical position. “An absolute responsibility—that much of a divine or metaphysical essence none of us is” (*MJ*, 333). Maxim’s logic is not able to comprehend a position like this, one that admits of a nuance outside the power of reason to control. It is justified not solely through thought, nor through force of feeling, but the point of their “natural connection” as he puts it in *The Liberal Imagination*’s preface—a connection established in this novel through Laskell’s experience, through the Caldwell’s tale.

The assertion of Laskell’s experience comes not much later. Whatever “anarchy of the world” Marxism and Maxim’s Christianity are trying jointly to destroy—we might alternately render it as “variousness and possibility,” to borrow Trilling’s language of the liberal imagination—Laskell is willing to fight for it, however long the odds:

“The supreme act of the humanistic critical intelligence—it perceives the cogency of the argument and acquiesces in the fact of its own extinction.”

“You have been very clever, Maxim,” said Laskell. “Cleverer than I thought a man could ever be. But you are wrong on one point—I do not acquiesce.”

“Yes,” said Maxim, still in his gay, bright excitement. “Of course I was wrong. You cannot possibly acquiesce. But it does not matter, John,” he said kindly, “whether you do or not.”

“It matters,” Laskell said. “Oh, it matters very much. It is the only thing that matters.” (*MJ*, 338)

Even in the face of the assertion of an apparently iron logic, Laskell, buoyed by his experience, refuses to “acquiesce.” Here, in Maxim’s dialogue, we see the same “gay, bright excitement” that accompanied Laskell’s own clever attempt to reason Duck out of his guilt in the moments after Susan’s death. Laskell, conversely, demonstrates no smug satisfaction; he even identifies Maxim’s thinking as “clever,” thus denigrating it. Laskell’s refusal to acquiesce operates on a plane outside of what Maxim can control. First, it derives its force from nature and experience rather than pure reason. It does not need to cede its position before the assertion of “the cogency of the argument”—it is something that arises from the space outside of human practical activity, in the work of the will confronting the vagary and unpredictability of necessity. Second, even as Maxim tries to dismiss Laskell’s refusal, trying to claim that it “does not matter,” Laskell asserts that “it matters very much,” even being “the only thing that matters,” as that refusal is the evidence of Laskell’s “motion of growth,” of his realization of the third movement of the fortunate fall wherein “spiritedness” and “authority,” as he identifies in his final interpretation of Emily’s bowl, are able to grow out of the soil of tragedy. Stalin’s dialectical logic has no rational way to respond to a claim like Laskell’s, as that claim undermines two of its fundamental premises: that the world only exists insofar as human beings can manipulate it, and that everything—reality, value, all of it—is subject to the winds of History, blown and directed by Communist reason, far beyond the power of any one human being to resist it.

In the Stalinist imagination, the only way to deal with someone like Laskell is through force, the brute assertion of authoritarian power to destroy something that does not and cannot comport with the narrative of the world being written. And, as expected, this is where Maxim begins to turn as he reaches the fever pitch of the imagination of the world to come: “‘And when we [Maxim and the Crooms]’ve made it and it has done its work, then maybe we will resurrect John Laskell. But resurrection implies—’ And he shrugged” (*MJ*, 337). Even a logic like Maxim’s, self-satisfied with its own “cogency” and assured of its objectivity, turns where logics like this always turn when faced with something they cannot overcome.

In the following chapter, we will examine a different expression of resistance to Stalinist logic. Through an engagement with Ralph Ellison, I will argue that this resistance is the assertion of oneself, and particularly the privacy of one’s own mind, in the face of Soviet attempts to undermine human variation in pursuit of a supposedly perfect “new man”—a new kind of human being who was always already one with the state.

SELF-FASHIONING:
Ralph Ellison and the Problem of the Soviet “New Man”

In the previous chapter, I examined the evolution of Stalinist dialectical logic out of its phenomenological foundations in Marx, showing how it imagined a world infinitely malleable before the force of the Communist state. In my reading of Lionel Trilling, I showed one possible response to this worldview: the assertion of the worth of struggle in the face of necessity, the will’s “refusal to acquiesce” in the face of its domination as a measure of human value. Trilling’s body of work demonstrates a key affective principle: that existing in between, taking up a position juxtaposed against both “absolute responsibility” and “the absence of responsibility,” as Laskell puts it, is extraordinarily difficult. The “normative image of humanity” that Trilling begins to outline is a human being who suffers, but who can change and grow *because of*—not *despite*—that suffering. Such is, for Trilling, what it means to become free.

This chapter explores the evolution of that principle, the development of the self, in the work of Ralph Ellison, one of its most consistent expositors. Across his career, Ellison developed a theory of what he called “variation,” a principle associated with the complexity of the Black historical experience in America, jazz music, and American democracy itself, among other things.¹ Yet Ellison does not do so in a vacuum. Ellison’s vision reaches its most concrete expression in his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, whose main antagonistic force is a rough analogue for the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) of the time, an organization called “The Brotherhood.” In that novel, through

the Brotherhood, Ellison most thoroughly delineates his vision's opposite: a new model of the subject deprived of all possibility of variation and, consequently, all individuality.

In Soviet terms, this new subject was a concept known as the "new man."

Near the end of a 1924 treatise titled *Literature and Revolution*, Leon Trotsky imagines the world as it will be when Communism's materialist *telos* is realized, when its art finally corresponds to its ideology. He imagines the rapid development and growth of human beings to immeasurable new heights:

Man at last will begin to harmonize himself in earnest. He will make it his business to achieve beauty by giving the movement of his own limbs the utmost precision, purposefulness and economy in his work, his walk and his play [...] Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman.²

According to Trotsky, human beings, at the peak of their evolution after the realization of Communism, will engage in a process of self-mastery, discarding the remnants of their animal nature—the lack of "precision, purposefulness, and economy"; the influence of unconscious "instinct"—to be left perfected. In their perfection, human beings cease to be human beings as we understand them. They, for Trotsky, become (in terms that begin to sound fascistic) "a higher social biologic type," even "if you please, a superman." In essence, human beings will be able to transcend their own humanity. But, for all of Trotsky's assurance that these new beings "will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx," as he says shortly after, the terms he uses have implications beyond strict betterment. After all, a person reorganizing one's body to produce "the utmost precision, purposefulness and economy in his work, his walk, and his play" evokes the image of machines on an assembly line, not human activity. More critical, however, is

Trotsky's assertion that this transcended human being will "master his own feelings [and] make them transparent." Transparent to *whom*? Within Soviet ideology, that question has an easy answer. The agent of dialectical transformation, after all, is no individual person, nor collection thereof, but the proletariat as a class. To the extent individuals possess distinctions from this class, they are less apt for their historical role. Alexey Stakhanov, the Russian miner who was said to have taken his jackhammer and produced 102 tons of coal—fourteen times his quota—in just under six hours, was never framed as extraordinary.³ Rather, Stakhanov was humble and, above all, perfectly *ordinary*—an exemplar to his countrymen, what they ought to strive to be, an image so clear that his name was attached to a state-sponsored cult of emulation that Stalin himself likened to a "conflagration."⁴

Ellison, in contrast, draws power in his writing from the force of its image of the cosmopolitan personality, the antithesis of this Soviet vision of a "new man." This cosmopolitan personality is no desiccated, rootless rationalist, the humbug of fascists and Bolsheviks alike, but the *élan* of world community, of the connection between all human beings through the birth of "complex cultural ambiguity."⁵ Ellison closes that essay, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," with an image of the complexity of individual human identity that he certainly had no idea so closely paralleled Edmund Husserl's incandescent evocation of a "phoenix of a new life-inwardness and spiritualization" in the 1935 Vienna Lecture: "where there's a melting pot there's smoke, and where there's smoke it is not simply optimistic to expect fire, it's imperative to watch for the phoenix's vernacular, but transcendent, rising" (*CERE*, 523).⁶ Vernacular *and* transcendent.

Ellison's vision of the self-fashioning of individual identity is the fusion, entirely unproblematic but hard-won, of part and whole, the one never subsuming the other.

In this chapter, I argue that Ellison—across his body of work but in *Invisible Man* in particular—seeks to elaborate a vision of the self-constructed individual, a person made of many potentially incompatible parts, who seizes her distinctive sense of self in the face of a constant pressure to conform. That pressure, under the Soviet aegis, is no mere conventionality, but rather a competing vision: that of a different kind of human being, one inseparable from the body of the proletariat, whose “sole norm of behavior” is the resolution associated with that class's historical mission. For Ellison, this new kind of humanity is a house of mirrors, a world robbed of the complexity that makes it significant, “a comic-book street in a comic-book town on a comic-book day in a comic-book world.”⁷ That competing vision of humanity is no image of human beings at all, but the pinnacle of dehumanization, a state that in its quiescence is little different from death.

Ellison's liberalism consists in his assertion of the importance of the “exciting and most unexpected metamorphoses within the self-creating personality,” as he calls it in “Chehaw Station” (*CERE*, 516). Just as Trotsky's understanding of art as a socialist project directed him towards an ascetic vision of humanity reduced to its essential components, wrought solely in its class interest and poised to transcend itself, Ellison understands “the very *spirit* of art to be defiant of categories and obstacles,” where the “self-creating personality” must undertake a project of “personal conquest.” It is a journey where, through their own considerable effort, the individual may become free: by engaging in “transcendent forms of symbolic expression, agencies of human freedom” (*CERE*, 518).

To begin, I will discuss an unusual paradox of the Russian Revolution's ideological foundations and discuss how the artistic form of socialist realism worked to remedy that paradox during Stalin's dictatorship. I will turn to a long polemical essay near-contemporary with *Invisible Man*, Czeslaw Miłosz's 1953 *The Captive Mind*, to explore and delineate the substance of socialist realism's ideal subject: the "new man" of Trotsky's imagining, developed further in Soviet ideological discourse regarding the role and function of art and literature. In contrast, I contend, Ellison develops across his nonfiction an argument about the centrality of variation to human identity and, moreover, the human experience as such. It is in the process of self-creation, self-fashioning out of discordant parts, where human life finds its realization for Ellison. Lastly I will juxtapose two key characters from *Invisible Man*, the narrator and Brother Tod Clifton, to show how Ellison imagines the dehumanization that accompanies the Communist vision of the ideal human being to manifest. Where Clifton "plunges outside of history" and becomes the ideal figure of abjection for the Brotherhood, the narrator, I argue, labors to redeem Clifton after his death, rediscovering Clifton's individuality and, in the depths of his grief, forging his own.

SOCIALIST REALISM AND THE NEW MAN

From the end of the Russian Civil War in 1922, the newly established Soviet Union faced a serious, even existential, theoretical dilemma: its revolution had taken place backwards. In traditional Marxism, a Communist revolution leading to the overthrow of bourgeois capitalist order is supposed to be the consequence of a long process of growing class consciousness among industrial laborers, the group Marx had in

mind as his proletariat. The class interests of the bourgeoisie would, by necessity, cause the ongoing alienation of the proletariat through the expropriation of the value produced by their labor. The victory of Communism within a given economy would come—and *could only* come—when class conflict had peaked and the proper stage of history was reached, wherein the struggle of the proletariat would finally overcome capitalism and begin the process of establishing socialism, a process that, after the final abolition of all class society, would lead to Communism, the ultimate stage of the historical development of political economy.

But, in Russia, none of this had taken place. Over the course of 1917, the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, had successfully overthrown first the Russian monarchy and then the republican Provisional Government to gain power over the Russian state, a power consolidated with the end of the Civil War. But this takeover had not taken place through the efforts of a unified proletariat, but by those of the respectively smaller number of dedicated Communist agitators and dissidents, aided at key moments by specific workers in specific capacities. In effect, the Bolsheviks had won “proletarian” control over the state without having successfully raised the class consciousness of the proletariat in whose name they governed. Moreover, these people, the vast majority of Russians, were not industrial workers laboring in highly concentrated factory settings, but peasants, living on subsistence incomes (if they had “incomes” at all) scattered across the approximately six million square miles of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). The Bolsheviks, in essence, had engineered and executed the first ever successful socialist revolution—without having produced a *bona fide* expression of

socialist consciousness (much less a true proletarian class consciousness) in the general population, in conditions as alien as practicable from Marx's analysis.

Lenin's approach to the problem, up until his early death in 1924 and then continued in part by successor Soviet premier Alexei Rykov, was to put off its resolution. In international relations, Lenin and others believed that Russia as a nation served as the equivalent to a vanguard party for an imminent wave of Communist revolutions across Europe, and thus the USSR actively supported a variety of actual uprisings, dissident movements, and international Communist coalitions. In domestic economic matters, the establishment of what these leaders would think of as "proper" Communism was repeatedly delayed. During the Civil War, the Bolshevik government implemented "War Communism," a militarized economic system whose central aim was the provision of resources to the Red Army, understanding it to be a temporary arrangement in a situation of extreme duress. After the end of the war, Lenin established the "New Economic Policy" [Новая экономическая политика], a moderate and eventually cronyist economic system that Lenin himself understood as incorporating elements of capitalism, a free market, and profit-seeking in industry, in an attempt to mitigate the economic damage caused by World War I and the Civil War. It was not until Stalin took full control over the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1927-28 that the Soviet government attempted to resolve the dilemma posed by the Revolution.

In the matter of Russia's largely peasant-agrarian economy, Stalin and his regime sought to establish retroactive continuity with Marxist theory by forcing the Russian economy through an accelerated variant of the traditional stages of history. In practice, that meant the USSR had a concrete ideological need to industrialize, and to do so as fast

as possible. This need was the impetus for the succession of Stalin's "five-year plans" [Пятилетние планы развития народного хозяйства СССР], state-controlled economic policies meant to rapidly introduce and establish Russia's industrial capacity, often through unrealistic and unobtainable production targets.

With regard to the production of Communist consciousness among the Soviet population, the government proceeded with a more complex series of measures. The contradiction posed by an existing socialist state—the first such successful example of the twentieth century—whose people were not necessarily ideologically motivated by Communism was a substantial problem for "Soviet identity." With the problem unresolved, the Soviet Union was forced to present, simultaneously and yet contradictorily, two images of itself. On the one hand, the Soviet Union, because of the victory of socialism in one country, was supposed to be the greatest and most prosperous society in the history of the world. On the other, this supposedly ideal society was, it seemed, constantly beleaguered by enemies within and without, and perpetually on the brink of utter destruction at the hands of reactionaries beholden to the West, to capitalism, and to their apotheosis: the United States. As such, Stalin's government proceeded through a campaign, sometimes explicit and sometimes not, reaching into art, culture, interpersonal relations, and ultimately the fundamental questions of human life itself, to create a totally new image of human being in the world—a model that good Soviet citizens could strive to emulate and eventually become. The model was the subject of the artistic movement known as socialist realism.

"Socialist Realism," as Lukács defined it in his essay containing the phrase, can be understood quite literally: literature "rooted in a socialist understanding of reality."⁸

Lukács gives some detail as to what he means by this earlier in his essay. In general, he understands socialist realism in two ways. First, socialist realism, for him, is perspectival, analyzing reality from *within* a socialist mode of understanding; it emerges from “using this perspective to describe the forces working towards socialism *from the inside* [...] to locate those human qualities which make for the creation of a new social order.”

(“CRSR,” 93-94, emphasis Lukács’s). Second, socialist realism has a definite temporal structure, oriented towards the future; its whole “ideological basis is an understanding of the future [...] socialist realism is able to portray from the inside human beings whose energies are devoted to the building of a different future” (“CRSR,” 95-96). In this sense, socialist realism is essentially an anticipatory realism. It attempts to depict a reality that does not yet exist in the commonly-held world, but is the reality understood to be the endpoint of the developmental progress of history by those working to bring it about: that is, by socialists. Lukács is explicit that the relevant perspective, the one determining the condition of the “inside,” is the perspective of that imagined future-to-come. Not only does the ideological orientation towards the future *necessarily* entail portrayal “from the inside,” the “psychological and moral make-up” of the persons depicted from the inside “is determined by this”—that is, the future-to-come.

Though Lukács’ elaboration is somewhat convoluted, his point is straightforward. In essence, he argues that socialist realism is the apotheosis of realist literature because it depicts the ultimate reality: that of triumphant socialism, as interpreted by triumphant socialists. Inasmuch as the ideological structure of socialism as Lukács understands it (an explicitly Soviet model) is consistent with itself, then the reality to be depicted will likewise be consistent. Furthermore, the relevant human internality to depict is not any

human life selected at random, but the life of someone whose “psychological and moral makeup is determined” in its entirety by the socialist future.

For those invested in the project entailed by socialist realism, literature and related cultural works were utilitarian, functional insofar as they moved culture closer to what it understood to be the basic developmental tendency of society towards (Soviet) Communism. In a speech given at the 1934 Soviet Writers’ Congress, Karl Radek, then the head of the International Information Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPSU, argued that the work of realism was the “selection” of “phenomena [...] from the point of view of what is essential, from the point of view of guiding principles.” These guiding principles were straightforward: “Select all phenomena which show how the system of capitalism is being smashed, how socialism is growing, not embellishing socialism but showing that it is growing in battle, in hard toil, in sweat.”⁹ To the extent the depicted phenomenon advanced this image, it was realistic; to the extent it disputed, or undermined, this image, it was at best “vulgar naturalism,” if not outright reaction.

The most important component of the theories underlying socialist realism, at least for these purposes, is the necessity of the connection between individual psyche and social-developmental laws. Kołakowski rightly identifies this significance as derived from Marx himself. In his reading of Lukács in volume 3 of *Main Currents of Marxism*, Kołakowski commends him for his understanding that “Marx believed in a dialectic in which the understanding and transformation of the world *were one and the same process*, so that the dilemmas of freedom versus necessity, facts versus values, and will versus prediction lost their meaning.” (emphasis mine). This is, of course, a restatement of Marx’s realization in the “Theses on Feuerbach” that “the chief defect of all hitherto

existing materialism [...] is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively.”¹⁰ Kołakowski goes on to reaffirm the importance of recognizing this process of identity as he continues to elaborate Lukács. He writes that “in the historically privileged case of the working class the ‘objective’ process *coincided* with the development of the awareness of the process, so that free action and historical inevitability became *one and the same thing*” (Kołakowski, 1024, *emphases mine*). It is not sufficient, within this logic, for the free actions of individuals to be aligned with, or to coincide happily with, or even to be disciplinarily governed by a state attuned to, the understanding of the developmental movement of history. The two *had* to be *the same thing*, a single identity. They cannot exist apart.

Understood thusly, a curious parallel becomes evident. The problems related to the logic of socialist realism, that is, the attempt to produce a unity of individual consciousness with historical law where it ought already to have existed, recapitulates the central existential Soviet dilemma I described earlier: a Communist revolution achieved without the production of a corresponding Communist class consciousness. In a society where socialism in the Soviet model has triumphed, distinguishing “socialist” realism from any other kind of realism, or thinking of it as a discrete artistic policy or movement, cannot make sense. ‘Socialist’ realism, by its rights, would just be realism—or, perhaps *a fortiori*, sub-artistic banalities, the bare facts of life. The fact of socialist realism as it existed in the Soviet Union in the period of its ascendancy is a living paradox, an existential problem that demands resolution. The intended end, in fact, is the abolition of

the need to perform a “socialist” reality. There should be no need to labor to present an appropriate face because so doing should be redundant.

Socialist realism, as with much of Stalin’s general approach to the larger version of the problem, attempted to correct this dilemma by working to make people into the sort of beings demanded by its theory. A famous toast of which Stalin was reportedly quite fond, given by Aleksandr Fadeev commending the Soviet author Mikhail Sholokhov, describes writers in the socialist realist mode as the “engineers of human souls,” the labor on which he explicitly called an “important form of production.”¹¹ First, the idea of a “soul” is not a concept native to Communism, but is quite native to Russian thought.¹² Second, to “engineer” a soul implies that the human soul is malleable through human direction, and, moreover, that the task of manipulating a soul could be done scientifically, in a consistent, replicable fashion. Replicability is essential to the project of linking “free action” with “historical inevitability,” as Kołakowski calls the two poles, because any divergence among the free actions of individuals undermines the systematicity of historical development. History is supposed to move forward by a logic that cannot be undone by the vagaries of dissident individual choice, and moreover, such dissident choices should be conceptually impossible, just as a person cannot freely disregard the laws of physics and will her body to act as if they did not exist. This is the type of worldview and consciousness that Radek has in mind when he urges Soviet writers to “show the typical in the individual [...] basing yourself on the criterions of the laws of historical development” (“Proletarian Art”).

Consequently, the project of producing the “new man,” and especially as it manifested in socialist realist applications, sought to do two things: to render a new

image of the “typical,” an aspirational model that was to be understood as the inherent progressive tendency of human beings as such; and to encourage emulation, the work by individuals on themselves to self-fashion, aided by socialist realist literature and other similar cultural tendencies, into this new image. As Katerina Clark observes, this happens on two levels. First, the production of socialist realist literature itself is emulatory, where aspirant writers were to follow a procedure “comparable to the procedure followed by medieval icon painters,” wherein “just as the icon painter looked to his original to find the correct angle for a particular saint’s hands, the correct colors for a given theme, and so on, so the Soviet novelist could copy the gestures, facial expressions, symbols, etc. used in various canonical texts”: Fadeev’s *The Young Guard*, Gorky’s *Mother*, Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel Was Tempered*, among other model novels specifically mentioned in speeches made to the Writer’s Union.¹³ Second, the literature itself—both the canonical novels and their many emulations—themselves generally follow a “master plot” explicitly concerned with individual development towards a generalized Communist ideal. As Clark describes it, “this tale is of a questing hero who sets out in search of ‘consciousness.’ En route he encounters obstacles that test his strength and determination, but in the end he attains his goal.”¹⁴

Essentially, socialist realism prescribes a *Bildungsroman*-like plot. Here, the hero’s development, explicitly meant to be emulated by a piece of literature’s readers as part of the process of the “engineering” of their souls, is towards a generic and ideal mode of being in line with the logic of history. To the extent that this effort works, and individuals become “new men,” the underlying tensions between the theory and the reality of both socialist realism and the Stalinist-Bolshevik project itself disappear.

Among the most well-known ideas to come out of *The Captive Mind*, a polemical text written by the Polish expatriate novelist Czesław Miłosz in 1953, one directly concerns issues of appearance and emulation. “Ketman,” the concept Miłosz adapts from what Arthur de Gobineau ascribed in the mid-nineteenth century to certain Persian Muslim communities, seems to Miłosz an appropriate description of a Soviet double consciousness. For Gobineau, Miłosz says, Ketman is the practice of publicly avowing—and even performing fanaticism for—certain beliefs that one might privately reject. Though this form of representation might originate out of a desire for self-preservation, Miłosz through Gobineau argues, the real justification for maintaining this firm public / private dichotomy is a belief in the goodness of the system itself, combined with a selfish desire to be seen as noble in the system’s eyes. “Thus one acquires,” Gobineau writes of successful Ketman, “the multiple satisfactions and merits of having placed oneself and one’s relatives under cover, of not having exposed a venerable faith to the horrible contact of the infidel, and finally of having, in cheating the latter and confirming him in his error, imposed on him the shame and spiritual misery he deserves.”¹⁵ Miłosz sees this way of acting present in the everyday conduct of people living in the Soviet Union. These are people who, Miłosz explicitly says, are compelled to resolve the dilemma posed by self-evident contradictions between the official theoretical avowals of Marxism-Leninism and the practical applications of Stalin’s rule by “becoming actors” (*CM*, 51).

If Soviet citizens had to become actors, a new question emerges: what role was the state asking them to play? On the surface, the key feature seems to be the need to see no contradiction between official theory and concrete practice in the daily life of the

Soviet Union. More importantly, though, Soviet citizens were expected to *profess* their belief that these contradictions did not exist as publicly, and consistently, as possible. The task for Stalin, then, was to create conditions by which all people living under Soviet rule were given some form of exposure, enough to give the (repeated) opportunity to make these kinds of professions. Miłosz, in sections covering the bulk of the middle of his extended essay, tells the stories of four people, all writers, who are gradually transformed into loyal believers in the Soviet state. Though these stories are each fascinating and worthy of extended analysis elsewhere, they are outside the scope of the present argument. Because each of these people were writers, they had access to means of verifiable publicity—their written words—that the average Soviet citizen did not. To make sense of the principle I discuss above, a more general case serves better.

Fortunately, Miłosz, in the “Ketman” chapter, provides just such a concrete description. Under the heading of “ethical Ketman” (the profession of individual moral consistency with Soviet precepts), one of several specific types of the general case, Miłosz discusses what he considers the “key point” in the Soviet cultural program: “the development of a new man” (*CM*, 71). This project is legible in two ways: first, the development of the characteristics and comportment of a novel type of being, named the “new man” (the “type”); second, the development of means and methods by which a person could, then, be “developed” into this “new man” (the “fashioning”). The type informs the fashioning, and only through the fashioning, in the eyes of the Soviet state, could the mission of the type be realized.

The belief underpinning these two parallel projects is the idea, explicitly advocated by high-ranking Soviet functionaries, that in Marxism “human being and its

essence” are understood as “the result of a process in which the concrete, sensual, active, and reflective individual is at the same time *object and subject*, creator and creature of himself.”¹⁶ That is, in the eyes of this form of Marxism, a human being is manifest in and of the world, and through his own labors, could reshape himself into whatever he wanted—or needed—to become, without limitation. Brigitte Studer calls this the idea of “perfectible being.”¹⁷

The belief that humanity was in essence perfectible and, moreover, that such a goal is desirable is by no means unique to the Soviet Union. It is, in fact, one of the key principles of the Continental European Enlightenment, most directly imagined by Condorcet in a “human species, released from all its chains, who has escaped likewise from the dominion of chance and from the enemies of progress, marching with firm and certain steps on the path towards truth, virtue, and well-being.”¹⁸ The Soviet variant was unique in its assurance that perfectibility could materially be achieved, not in the abstract future but in immanent, concrete time; that any individual could achieve such perfectibility with sufficient work on the self; and that the achievement of perfectibility entailed self-*purification* from various “errors” and residual petty-bourgeois “attitudes.”¹⁹ The language surrounding this official Soviet political and ethical position confirms these features. Miłosz describes the position as both “ascetic” and “puritanical”; Stalin himself understands the dialectical process of history as the transition between a past “dying away” and a future “being born”—a process he believes to be driven inherently by “violent upheaval.”²⁰

Ultimately, Miłosz argues, the “new man” imagined by Soviet Communist ideology has a specific mode of life grounded on a cleansed self. I quote here at length to give a sense of the affect of the “new man,” because it has implications for Ellison:

The ‘new man’ is conditioned to acknowledge the good of the whole as the sole norm of his behavior. He thinks and reacts like others; is modest, industrious, satisfied with what the state gives him; limits his private life to nights spent at home, and passes all the rest of his time amidst his companions at work or at play, observing them carefully and reporting their actions and opinions to the authorities [...] After work one goes to political meetings or special lectures, thus lengthening a day that is without a moment of relaxation or spontaneity. The people one talks with may seem relaxed and careless, sympathetic and indignant, but if they appear so, it is only to arouse corresponding attitudes and to extract confidences which they can report to their superiors. (*CM*, 72)

This new form of life is conceived in collectivity, and dedicated to the proposition that all men, in their essence as human beings, are equal, and that all deviations from that norm are attitudes and confidences of great interest to superiors because they are a threat to all. Miłosz provides the base premise of the “new man”: that the good of the whole is the sole norm of individual behavior. That single premise, as Miłosz argues, is the sole necessary condition for a very specific mode of daily behavior to become standard. The individual, believing the good of the whole is the sole determinant of his own good, “thinks and reacts” like others. Because he has no basis to believe in any personal distinguishing superiority whatsoever, he is modest, and satisfied with his lot as provided by the state (as it is equal to the lot of everyone else, at least according to official ideology). His only interest is the good of the whole, so he is industrious, singularly devoted to the cause of the Revolution. He lacks personal desires, particularly ones that can lead to deviance, so he is chaste and prudent, staying at home when not at labor and only socializing in the approved, collectively minded venues of political meetings and special lectures. And yet,

amid all of this, he is foremost attentive and observant. The “new man” keeps an eye out at all times for the deviations of others, as they threaten at its core the premise that underpins the entirety of his existence: that one’s individual being only gains worth as a part of, and through, the progress of the whole.

Though Miłosz is writing about an abstract person, there is no sense that there is anything more substantial about that person a reader could learn. Just as for the perpetually observed Soviet citizen, the “new man” of Miłosz’s estimation is entirely transparent. No further detail can be provided because it does not exist. Everything he is, everything he can be, everything he does, and every possible step he could ever take are contained in those five sentences.

We now have the foundation we need to turn to Ellison.

THE MAN OF PARTS

Ralph Ellison is, above all, a thinker of entangled freedom. Across his entire body of work, from his first (and only complete) novel *Invisible Man* through his decades of essay writing and criticism to his unfinished second novel, he maintains a position that is unabashedly optimistic, even humanistic. Ellison believes deeply in what he calls “American” ideals: a fundamental belief in unabrogated freedom and full equality. Furthermore, he is committed to the deep centrality of the African American experience to the formation and realization of those ideals. The Black American experience, for him, is a metonym for the American experience as a whole, and as such, he insists on a reciprocal continuity between writers who are Black, white, and of other races. At the same time, he insists that such history is not *binding* on any individual. Even within the

context of literary history, authors maintain a fundamental agency of expression and creation.²¹ In a moment of social and racial turmoil in America, he emphasized the centrality of “discipline” and “sacrifice” towards the making of a better future.²² The common thread across all of these different Ellisonian ideas is a particular standpoint: that an individual, existing in a time and at a place, will always have some kind of relationship with history, a relationship that urges work on the self and, ultimately, self-fashioning. Yet Ellison’s understanding of that relationship could not be more different from the Soviet model. In fact it is, I argue, its exact opposite.

In “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” Ellison argues in favor of a specific understanding of the American audience member (or, as F.O. Matthiessen presciently called this entity in his 1941 work *American Renaissance*, the “common reader,” the term I will use henceforth).²³ This “common reader” is, as far as Ellison knows, the special product of certain cultural tendencies inherent in the concept of the United States. She is blessed with the ability to pare away “the sheerly ‘rhetorical’ elements—the flash and filigree—of the artist’s craft” and perceive truth in art. The common reader, for Ellison, engages in “antagonistic collaboration,” filling the roles of “both collaborator and judge” alongside an artist. (“Chehaw,” 496). Collaborator, because the common reader possesses strong investment in the truth of art, and acts as the object of persuasion and exhortation. Judge, because any American audience, in its pluralism, is likely to have in it “at least *one* individual whose knowledge and taste will complement or surpass [the artist’s] own” (“Chehaw,” 498). Ultimately, difference—the distinction between the writer and the reader, or the performer and the listener—is the driving force of artistic progress, as Ellison understands it.

Arguments of this sort exist across Ellison's essays. In another, "The Novel as a Function of American Democracy," Ellison argues that the United States is a nation "based upon revolution, dedicated to change through basic concepts stated in the Bill of Rights and the Constitution," making it the model of "an *open* society" (*CERE*, 761). In this way, the United States represents the institutionalization of the process of social change as a topic in and of itself, as it appears to an individual with a distinct, perceiving self and a fluid inner life. For Ellison, in so doing, the United States replicates the essential features of the genre of the novel, which is committed to "produce imaginative models of the total society"—that is, rendering through the eyes of an individual a picture of a possible world (*CERE*, 768). The United States, therefore, brings to bear a unique "national style"—one of "variation," a concept that recurs in his writing with reference to the ethical ideal of the United States (*CERE*, 767).

"Variation," in the sense Ellison uses it, serves as a close parallel to "pluralism," a more political-philosophically oriented term that often finds itself joined to liberalism. In that idiom, it makes sense to think of Ellison's vision joining pluralism to a kind of generative populism, wherein his prototypical American subject is a peer to artists, and in some situations an artist herself, as well as a site of mutual recognition. She is always a medley of different identity categories, from race to sex to class and beyond, being both part of these different *ethne* while *also and simultaneously* being part of an American cultural and political *kosmos*. To privilege the *ethnos*, as Ellison contends primarily that white nativists of his time do, sanctifies "blood" and "avoids the mysteries and pathologies of the democratic process"—virtues and vices both ("Chehaw," 507). In this sense, the American subject is the architect of what Ellison calls "man-made positives,"

those normative values derived from culture, rather than originating in nature, which are valuable in and of themselves (“Chehaw,” 506).

Their “man-made”-ness seems the most important feature of these new normative values to Ellison, who focuses quite intently on the possibilities for pluralism that manifest themselves in everyday life. Much of his understanding of the centrality of the African American experience to the American experience, a major thread in his work, concerns itself on the one hand with the consequences of excessive deference to conditionality, the separation of the “African” from the “American”; and, on the other, the affirmation of work on the self as the path to well-being—but well-being through meaningful difference. The image of difference that animates Ellison offers a substantive version of cosmopolitan life. Difference, for Ellison, is substantive. It’s the sort of thing that a given person could see walking down the street.

In fact, the most concrete image of the American ideal of variation present in Ellison’s published work is from a scene of him walking down the street. In “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” Ellison remarks upon a man he once saw during a walk he took on New York City’s Riverside Drive on a Sunday afternoon. This individual, Ellison says, was “a light-skinned, blue-eyed, Afro-American featured individual who could have been taken for anything from a sun-tinged white Anglo-Saxon, an Egyptian [...] to a strayed member of certain tribes of Jews” (*CERE*, 509). More notable than his ethnicity to Ellison, though, was his manner of dress. He was “clad in handsome black riding boots and fawn-colored riding breeches of English tailoring [...] a dashy dashiki (as bright and as many-colored as the coat that initiated poor Joseph’s troubles in biblical times) flowed from his broad shoulders down to the arrogant, military flare of his breeches-tops.”

Further down, “six feet six inches or so above his heels, a black homburg hat tilted at a jaunty angle floated majestically on the crest of his huge Afro-coiffed head.” (*CERE*, 510). Of special note in this cornucopia of details is the distinctness with which Ellison describes the different parts; each can shine on its own without melding into the next.

Whatever unity existed in this “man of parts,” as Ellison calls him, comes out of how he acts, rather than any intrinsic linkage between his parts. After describing his appearance, Ellison notes that the man on Riverside Drive has appeared for a specific purpose. He mounts his (Japanese, Ellison notes) camera on a fence-post and uses its self-timer to take a “series of self-portraits,” and then takes more with the camera set on the hood of his car (a blue Volkswagen fitted with an aftermarket Rolls-Royce radiator), “a lengthy ebony cigarette holder” in hand. Ellison’s reflections on the man are key, and are worth my quoting at some length:

Now, *I can only speculate* about what was going on in the elegant gentleman’s mind, who he was, or what visual statement he intended to communicate. I only know that his carefully stylized movements (especially his “pimp-limp” walk) marked him as a native of the U.S.A., a home-boy bent upon projecting and recording with a native verve something of his complex sense of cultural identity [...] neither his features nor his car nor his dress was of a whole. Yet he conducted himself with an obvious pride of person and of property, inviting all and sundry to admire and wonder in response to himself as his own sign and symbol, his own work of art [...] The man himself *was hidden somewhere within, his complex identity concealed by his aesthetic gesturing*. And his essence lay not in the somewhat comic clashing of styles, but in the mixture, the improvised form, the willful juxtaposition of modes [...] His Volks-Rolls-Royce *may have been loaded with Marxist tracts and Molotov cocktails*, but his clashing of styles nevertheless sounded an integrative, vernacular note, an American compulsion to improvise upon the given. His garments were, literally and figuratively, of many colors and cultures, his racial identity interwoven of many strands. *Whatever his politics, sources of income, hierarchical status and such*, he revealed his essential “Americanness” in his free-wheeling assault upon traditional forms of the Western aesthetic. (*CERE*, 510-11, all emphases mine).

The full force of the Riverside Drive man's essential "Americanness," as Ellison describes it across these two pages of his essay, derives not only from the leaps of stylistic excess he had chosen to take that day on the streets of New York. That is important, of course, because it serves as the substance through which he could make that "Americanness" palpable. But of greater significance is how he unifies his "variation": through self-assertion blended with concealment. The man's "obvious pride of person and of property," his "native verve" as he makes it available for the artistic consumption of both his onlookers and his own camera, is the thread that holds the rest together. His personality integrates because of these different elements' presence within a self that is buoyed by self-assurance. It is "his own work of art": a demonstration of individual creativity to others, yet performed for its own sake. On top of that assertion, Ellison stresses repeatedly throughout this passage, there nevertheless remains something hidden about the man. Ellison "can only speculate" about the contents of his mind; the man "was hidden somewhere within"; to the point that one could make statements about his essence "whatever his politics" or et cetera.

The variation that Ellison contends is the central defining feature of "Americanness," ultimately, is a product of identity, and specifically of a sense of identity significant for its distinction from other comparable identities. That identity is made through labor on the self, but even at the point of its forging, that identity still withholds its totality, refusing to make that totality visible to any given onlooker. The absence of a "whole" or his status as a "man of parts" is confirmed as much by Ellison's gaps in knowledge about the man that he is witnessing as it is by the sheer difference of the component parts. If there is a central governing logic to the man's sense of identity, he

does not share it, and is not compelled to. In fact, outside of these two pages, he could go on to dress and act completely differently, with no reference to this version, and Ellison and his readers would be none the wiser. As such, the man through his appearance poses “the old, abiding American questions,” ones that are not rhetorical and might even lack a straightforward answer entirely: “Who am I? What about me?” (“Chehaw,” 511).

Therefore, Ellison’s specific juxtaposition of the “American compulsion to improvise upon the given,” the idea of variation itself, against the imagined “Marxist tracts and Molotov cocktails” loading his car comes to seem not only less arbitrary than one might otherwise think, but, further, not surprising. As I argued earlier, among the most important features of the Soviet “new man” was his publicity before others, specifically as manifested “from the inside,” in the attempt to make his internal understanding of the world one with the dialectical laws of historical development. In total opposition to the Riverside Drive man, the “new man” described by Miłosz and implicit in the visions of Fadeev, Radek, and ultimately Stalin does not have an interiority to conceal because his personal beliefs are of perfect identity with his public-facing persona. Where the Riverside Drive man uses a multiplicity of parts to create for himself a distinctive way of being in the world, the “new man” represents an ideal towards which all people (guided by the heroes of socialist realism) should make themselves more similar. Where the Riverside Drive man, taking proto-selfies with his camera’s timer, takes great interest in the identity he has created for himself, the “new man,” as Miłosz says, will always “acknowledge the good of the whole as the sole norm of his behavior.” Where the Riverside Drive man produces the individual out of the raw material of the

everyday, the “new man” is the final expression of the “typical in the individual,” the objective law of history made flesh.

Ellison juxtaposing Marxism against American-ness in this fashion, a move that signifies a brief though explicit anti-Communism, should not be surprising, because the Soviet Communist ideal of self-fashioning as made concrete in the socialist realist tradition is the polar opposite of Ellison’s own idea of self-fashioning. He evidently derives this understanding from his own appraisal of the American literary tradition, and seemingly in particular Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (Ralph Waldo Ellison’s namesake’s) essay “Self-Reliance.” A proleptic image of Ellison’s Riverside Drive man comes before the eyes in Emerson’s exhortation to “insist on yourself; never imitate [...] that which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him.”²⁴ Emerson’s descriptions of self-reliance’s opposite, usually represented in the form of Puritan churches or clergy, coincide with the much later problem posed by the Soviet “new man.” Emerson criticizes a generic preacher: “If I know your sect, I anticipate your argument [...] do I not know beforehand that not possibly can he say a new and spontaneous word? [...] do I know that he is pledged to himself not to look but at one side, —the permitted side, not as a man, but as a parish minister?” (Emerson, 34). In the eyes of Bolshevism, all of this is a picture of the ideal. The “new man” cannot entertain the spontaneous, nor would he want to, because the full knowledge of the laws of historical development guides all his actions—as Lenin himself, in *What Is to Be Done?*, made clear. He, too, pledges himself to look only at “one side”—that is, to see the world from “inside,” from the perspective of “life in the epoch of victorious socialism,” as Radek calls it (“Proletarian Art”).

Ellison's own resistance to the idea that any kind of "objective" super-individual structure of historical development could possibly become one with an individual's own sense of self is evident across his work but is most explicit in his criticism of assumptions of race essentialism in literature. In the middle 1960s, Ellison engaged in a lettered debate with the white socialist literary critic Irving Howe, longtime editor of the magazine *Dissent*, in a pair of essays that has since become collectively known as "The World and the Jug." In these two essays, comprising both Ellison's original response to comments Howe made about Ellison in Howe's essay "Black Boys and Native Sons" and his rejoinder to Howe's response, Ellison castigates Howe for assuming that the many injustices faced by Black people in American daily life would have a necessary determining effect on his work as an artist. In "Black Boys and Native Sons," Howe argues that the African American novelist Richard Wright, and in particular his 1940 novel *Native Son*, best represents "the relationship between social experience and literature" as applied to the Black condition.²⁵ For Howe, this means novels that focus on the social and political condition of African Americans as a race. Howe assumes a basic impulse in that race towards protest; such is the only appropriate or conceivable good faith response to the oppression of white supremacy. Imbricated are "external conditions and personal will" ("BBNS," 364)—the latter mostly determined by the former. "We do not make our circumstances," Howe says, almost directly quoting Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*; "we can, at best, try to remake them" (368).

In the course of his defense of Wright, Howe attacks both Baldwin and, for no seeming reason, Ellison. Howe deems the literature of both to be political failures. In Baldwin's case, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* both fail to be

“representative” of “Negro life” (“BBNS,” 361)—*Giovanni’s Room* particularly damned for only having white characters. *Another Country*, Baldwin’s then-most recent novel, succeeds to the extent that it depicts a Wrightian protest naturalism but fails when it turns to the “entanglement of personal relationships,” which will be the subject of the following chapter (“BBNS,” 367). Ellison, for Howe, succumbs to the “ideological delusion” Howe believes endemic to the 1950s, particularly in *Invisible Man’s* portrayal of Stalinists and its “vapid and insubstantial” insistence on the liberation of “infinite possibilities” (“BBNS,” 363-64). For Howe, such infinite possibilities cannot possibly exist, for those are the wages of anti-Black racism in America, as the fate of Wright’s Bigger Thomas shows.

Ellison’s responses to Howe focus on undermining what contemporary scholar Kenneth Warren calls the African American “continuity thesis”: the idea that Black literary history represents an unbroken, self-referential chain of influence from slavery to the present.²⁶ For Ellison, the Black experience is discontinuous, because literary history extends beyond the bounds of race—thus it is unnecessary to attack Baldwin and Ellison to defend Wright (“Jug,” 157). Further, and more importantly, the entire category of “Black experience” is *not* primordial for Black writers. Instead, “men with black skins” have “retained their humanity before all of the conscious efforts made to dehumanize them” (“Jug,” 161). The oppressive character of Black life in America is not wholly an “abstract embodiment of living hell” but a site of “*discipline*” (emphasis Ellison’s): a path towards the realization of human richness and the creation of individuality (“Jug,” 161-62). For Ellison, the Black man’s “identity as a Western man, as a political being”

(“Jug,” 164) precedes racial particularity; indeed, racial particularity is one of many expressions of that primordial human identity.²⁷

As such, Ellison can chastise Howe for making Wright a father figure for both Baldwin and himself by way of “long-distance psychoanalysis” because he can claim the influence of Dostoevsky and Malraux where Howe could only see Wright (“Jug,” 168). Ironically, Ellison can also claim that Howe “strip[s] Wright of his individuality” (“Jug,” 165) by making him a representative of purely hellish Black experience. Howe’s failure is a critical failure of socialist temperament at this point in time, as Ellison sees it. Howe is the exemplar of a culture wherein “many of those who write of Negro life today seem to assume that as long as their hearts are in the right place they can be as arbitrary as they wish in their formulations [...] They have made of the no-man’s land created by segregation a territory for infantile self-expression and intellectual anarchy” (“Jug,” 170). Funnily enough, this “infantile self-expression and intellectual anarchy” (when they appear in the individual white socialist critic in the West), while retaining the same substance, transform into their exact opposites when seen under Soviet eyes. They become extremely serious affirmations of the centrality of the good of the whole above any distinctive self, and an existential, broadly felt, everyday sense of total stability: faith in the development of history as the answer to all complications and as the redeemer of a corrupted past.

BROTHER CLIFTON

Both Ellison’s own vision and his critique of its opposite, the Soviet vision of the “new man,” coincide and reach their most concrete expression in *Invisible Man*, Ellison’s 1952 novel. In *Invisible Man*, I argue, Ellison marshals his most sustained critique of the

idea of the “new man,” directly linking it to Soviet ideology (in the form of the Brotherhood, the novel’s representative Communist organization), through the juxtaposition of two narratives of development and their consequences. On the one hand, Ellison depicts the individual development of his narrator from the degrading racism of the “battle royal” through to his rejection of the Brotherhood and, eventually, his movement underground—a movement towards his ever-greater distinction from the “comic book” world, which confirms the narrator’s explicitly American individuality. On the other hand, there is also a developmental narrative of a character, in many respects similar to the narrator, who is carried along and transformed by the certainty of the Brotherhood’s ideology. Where the narrator becomes more distinct, this character—Brother Tod Clifton, the Brotherhood’s head of the Youth Division—gradually becomes more typical until his moment of discord with the Brotherhood, whereafter he “falls out of history,” as both he and the narrator describe it. His end, the product of his conditioning in the Soviet image, is his killing by police after descending to the degradation of hawking racist paper dolls on a street corner, a fate only redeemed by the narrator’s labor to re-personalize Clifton at his funeral.

The developmental narrative of the narrator is a well-understood and well-studied phenomenon, and I will not attempt to recapitulate the vast body of work dedicated to its interpretation here. Instead, I will focus on those elements of the narrative that operate most explicitly on two levels. First, I will attend to the possibilities of self-definition, particularly before others, that stage the process of individuation-as-growth for the narrator. Second, I will attend to the role of privacy, and in particular the privacy of the mind, as it contributes to the narrator’s growth.

In the context of the narrator's development plot, *Invisible Man* affirms a vision of social engagement based on the possibilities of self-definition and self-presentation before others, be they persons or institutions, so long as they further define, rather than abstracting, the person. The novel tends to present such moments concretely, from the specific references to the role of banks in evictions and its evocations of police brutality (*IM*, 270). But, more importantly, Ellison depicts the transformative potential of *social* identity, as opposed to human nature. Whatever tendencies a person may have as a human being, she exerts control over how she presents herself to other persons, to institutions, and to the whole society. Further, she is not limited to one such identity. Social identities, so the novel seems to say, are fluid, and embody different aspects of a given individual's complexity.

So is the case of the narrator's relationship with Miss Mary Rambo, where the narrator—up to a point—accepts the care she provides. At the point of her first appearance, after the narrator is discharged from the Liberty Paints “factory hospital,” the narrator is in a state of delirium; the text interweaves his internal monologue with the things that Miss Mary is telling him, registering but ephemeral (*IM*, 251-53). At no point, however, does the voice of the mind blend into the voice the narrator is hearing. The narrator is consistently presented in normal type, and Miss Mary in italics. As such, the narrator works through his own process of recognition while also admitting Miss Mary into his perception. Miss Mary, too, has her own sense of identity, and of the narrator's distinction; she frames her offer of rest and a cheap room as her not “*want[ing] to go in your business, I just want you to lay down till you rested and then you can go*” (*IM*, 253).

Though Miss Mary provides support, she does not direct, control, or govern the narrator; her offers are always made in full voluntariness.

These kinds of interactions need not only take place with present, or even strictly real, persons, however. In one important moment, after the narrator has joined the Brotherhood, he gazes upon a portrait of the Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass he has been given by another member, Brother Tarp. The narrator reflects on the parallels between himself and Douglass—two Black men who had come North to escape, in search of the possibility of redefinition. In his reflections, he affirms the centrality of self-labor to the process of self-distinction:

Sometimes I sat watching the watery play of light upon Douglass' portrait, thinking how magical it was that he had talked his way from slavery to a government ministry, and so swiftly [...] What had his true name been? Whatever it was, it was as *Douglass* that he became himself, defined himself. And not as a boatwright as he'd expected, but an orator. Perhaps the sense of magic lay in unexpected transformations. (*IM*, 381)

Whatever the nature of such unexpected transformations, two features matter: that they are genuinely “unexpected,” not predictable by way of projection; and that they are central to the process of “becoming” or “defining” oneself. In the narrator’s estimation, Douglass’s worth as a historical figure has very little, if anything, to do with his original intention to escape to the North, an odd position to take in relation to a person most famous for writing autobiographies. But even in Douglass’s autobiographical *oeuvre*, the raw material of the events of his life can be molded, shifted, and understood in different ways at different times, depending on the needs of the moment; there is a distinctive evolution from the *Narrative of the Life* through *My Bondage and My Freedom* to, finally, the postwar *Life and Times*.²⁸ Likewise, the narrator sees pre-eminent value in the “man-made positives” of Douglass’s identity as Douglass, the identity that he worked to

produce through his own efforts over the course of his life. The pursuit of individuality entailed adapting to contingency: the ever-changing demands of a world that cannot, in its entirety, be known or controlled.

As he says just afterwards: “No, you could never tell where you were going, that was a sure thing. The only sure thing. Nor could you tell how you’d get there—though when you arrived it was somehow right.” This is the lesson the narrator derives from the story of Douglass, crystallized in his “mighty leonine gaze”: that “the only sure thing,” other than the uncertainty of the world, is the labor that one performs on oneself in order to grow. That developing self is bound to others but is never obligated to dissolve itself into an image of the “typical,” whatever its ideological import.²⁹

The narrator has one more critical interaction in his ongoing education about the process of self-development, this time with a person he never actually meets. In the immediate aftermath of Brother Clifton’s killing by police, the narrator gives dueling speeches to the community with Ras the Exhorter, the novel’s Black nationalist figure. As the situation becomes more disorderly, the narrator takes the opportunity to flee, and he decides to buy a pair of cheap dark sunglasses, of the sort he had seen “thousands of times,” in order to obscure his identity against threats of violence. After he puts on the sunglasses, however, he begins to be misrecognized—as a man named Rinehart. This man, as the narrator comes to learn, is as varied as a person can seemingly get, embodying multiple distinct personae to a variety of different groups of people. In his long walk through Harlem, the narrator appears as Rinehart the ladies’ man (*IM*, 484), Rinehart the hipster and politician (485-86), Rinehart the machine boss (490), Rinehart the bookie (491), Rinehart who bribes the police (492), Rinehart the pimp (493-94) and

Rinehart the preacher (496-97). Nothing about the narrator's actual appearance changes during all of this. Only the groups of people with whom he interacts—the different communities in which Rinehart operates—do. Rinehart, whoever he is, has built a plethora of social identities out of a single personal identity, an identity that is accessible and the narrator is able to assume, however inadvertently, by wearing a pair of dark glasses. Out of this experience, the narrator feels freedom, “as though [he] had just been removed from a plaster cast and was unused to the freedom of movement” (*IM*, 499).

The glasses emancipate him from the weight of familiarity, revealing to him one of the keys to the next stage of his journey of self-development: a sense of interior privacy. Not only is he able to become someone else, but he is able to become *many* other people, each with a different set of personal relationships. “The world seemed to flow before [his] eyes,” he says, feeling the terror of openness: “freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, but the recognition of possibility” (*IM*, 499). Understanding freedom as the recognition of necessity alone fuses the individual consciousness to historical development: that is, the socialist realist model. As Trilling argues, the path to becoming free involves both the recognition of necessity *and* the recognition of possibility, which the narrator comes to understand here.

Though the narrator himself does not adopt Rinehart's ability to play multiple roles seamlessly, the experience demonstrates to him what literary scholar Ross Posnock calls the acknowledgment of spontaneous action.³⁰ Though Posnock mistakenly dismisses the model of the liberal humanist in his critique—we know from Amanda Anderson's work that liberalism need not be uncritical about “reformism”—he is right to affirm Ellison's commitment to “responsible social action” (Posnock, 213). In the world

that *Invisible Man* sketches, chaos is a given. There are two responses to that chaos, if one wishes not to be destroyed. The first is the desire for purification, of the sort inherent in the Soviet model of the “new man.” The second is the acceptance of adaptation, the ideal represented for the narrator by Frederick Douglass. One path leads to self-annihilation, and the other to self-realization; one to necessity, and one to possibility. I have sketched the outline of the latter path. I now turn to Brother Clifton.

The first time Brother Clifton is introduced, curiously enough, is immediately after the narrator receives the portrait of Frederick Douglass from Brother Tarp. His story ends, with his death at the hands of police, just before the narrator buys the glasses that allow him to experience the life of Rinehart. Though Brother Clifton’s story is briefer and undeniably more tragic than the narrator’s own, it is of equivalent importance to the novel’s critique of Soviet ideology, as concentrated in the image of the Brotherhood. It, too, is a developmental narrative, but presented as a warning: the inverse of the narrator’s development, it is the image of a fall, to be understood as the wages of the coming of the “new man.” In Clifton’s tale, Ellison shows a young Black man destroyed by racial prejudice, typification, and slavish devotion to the forward march of history. Only the narrator, near the end of his own story of development, is able to redeem what he once was: a person much like himself, full of potential, but most of all a distinct individual.

Brother Clifton first appears arriving late to a Brotherhood committee meeting, detained by a fight with Ras’s men. On his entrance, the narrator is struck by two things: his handsomeness and his ease. Of special note is the narrator’s recognition here of his “chiseled, black-marble features sometimes found on statues in northern museums,” providing the first time Clifton is marked as the form of an ideal, in this case, a

Hellenistic one (*IM*, 363). The narrator immediately pairs himself with Clifton, immediately sensing him as a “possible rival.” After a discussion of tactics related to work on “the eviction issue” (including a telling statement from Brother Jack that “the Brotherhood is against violence and terror and provocation of any kind—aggressive, that is,” 365), the narrator retires to privacy and reflects on the meeting in his office when he is joined by Brother Clifton. Here, the narrator notices that, in Clifton’s demeanor, there were “no signs of resentment, but a complete absorption in the strategy of the meeting” (*IM*, 367). Though he goes on to describe Clifton’s practical advice to him concerning Ras, this observation—that Clifton visibly presents “complete absorption in the strategy of the meeting” in his way of being—is the first tell that there’s less daylight between his own consciousness and the logic promulgated by the Brotherhood than one might expect. He projects a demeanor of perfect calmness, utterly certain in the efficacy of the Brotherhood’s “scientific” plan and the eventuality of the people of Harlem’s movement towards them. The narrator himself does not analyze any of this, leaving it to stand for now.

The next interaction the narrator has with Clifton, just after this, is in a much more active context—another confrontation with Ras the Exhorter and his men, which turns into a street brawl. At the apex of the chaos, the narrator and Clifton confront and fight Ras himself, who takes the opportunity to lay out his political philosophy by way of castigation of the two of them. Ras considers them “traitor[s] for white men,” unwilling to accept the reality of their racial condition and the inherent exploitation they face at the hands of white Brothers (*IM*, 376). While the narrator tries to argue back, Clifton is thrown into a nearly wordless rage; he repeatedly lunges at Ras and ends their encounter,

after being accused of “treason,” by knocking him out cold with a single punch. Even Ras recognizes Clifton’s purity, dismissing the narrator as “contaminated” but seeing Clifton as “the real black mahn [...] a black king!” (*IM*, 372).

In his subsequent address to Clifton, Ras makes a curious statement: he accuses Clifton of “fooling ‘round like this was the nineteenth century.” This is odd because the thing that most immediately comes to mind as associated with the nineteenth century in this context, the increasing aggression of American chattel slavery before the Civil War, seems as alien as possible from the prospect of role-play, especially “fooling ‘round.” Instead, Ras might be implicitly gesturing towards Clifton’s absorption in the Brotherhood as a Marxist enterprise. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. argues something similar in his 1949 treatise *The Vital Center*, arguing that:

the degeneration of the Soviet Union taught us a useful lesson, however. It broke the bubble of the false optimism of the nineteenth century. Official liberalism had long been almost inextricably identified with a picture of man as perfectible [...] the Soviet experience, on top of the rise of fascism, reminded my generation rather forcibly that man was, indeed, imperfect, and that the corruptions of power could unleash great evil in the world.³¹

By pegging “official liberalism,” a term for what Schlesinger considers collective “false optimism,” to the nineteenth century, he establishes a genealogical continuity between the utopian-scientific thinking of the nineteenth century—of which there is perhaps no greater example than Marx himself—and the fatal dilemmas of the Soviet experience in the twentieth. So if Ras actually implies that Clifton’s “fooling ‘round like this was the nineteenth century” gestures towards the utopian philosophies of that century (in this case, the Brotherhood’s quasi-Marxism) and their inadequacy to the twentieth century, then, at least in Ras’s eyes, Clifton performs an unshakeable faith in the promises of

utopian thinking—again, demonstrating how little separates Clifton’s self-consciousness from the Brotherhood’s ideology at this stage.

In the immediate aftermath of the fight, Clifton becomes quiet and teary. Though he is shaken, he does not, at least publicly, admit any positive feeling for Ras’s philosophy. Clifton does say, however, that “it’s on the inside that Ras is strong [...] on the inside he’s dangerous.” Clifton then consequently considers the possibility that “sometime a man has to plunge outside of history [...] plunge outside, turn his back... Otherwise he might kill somebody, go nuts” (*IM*, 377). These words are Clifton’s last in the novel—at least, Clifton’s last in the form in which he initially appears, before his total degeneration. After this conversation, Clifton disappears. At a strategy meeting, amid a tirade, Brother Jack tells the narrator that Clifton had “disappeared [...] disappeared!” after the narrator acknowledges that he hasn’t seen Clifton “in weeks”—which seems to have been more recently than anyone else had seen him (*IM*, 421). This is perplexing to the narrator for several reasons. On top of Clifton’s being “too responsible and ha[ving] too much to gain simply to have disappeared” (*IM*, 422), nothing appeared in any way out of the ordinary: “Brother Clifton had appeared at the district as usual up to the time of his disappearance. There had been no quarrels with committee members, and he was as popular as ever” (*IM*, 428). There seems to be nothing that would cause him to give up on the Brotherhood.

When Brother Clifton finally appears on his street-corner on Fifth Avenue, singing ditties and trying to peddle uncanny paper “Sambo” dolls to passersby, the absence of any seeming reason for him to end up like this makes his re-emergence all the more surprising. In existing scholarship on the novel, Clifton is often described as having

become “disillusioned” with the Brotherhood.³² However, the novel, neither here nor before, explains Clifton’s internal feelings about the Brotherhood. For all the reader knows, Clifton never abandons his initial demeanor of “complete absorption in the strategy of the meeting,” and his lack of quarrel with committee members is exactly what it seems to be. But the disjuncture between the statuesque Clifton of his initial appearance and the singing and gyrating Clifton, “riding easily back and forth in his knees,” now seemingly a homeless beggar, begs a reason (*IM*, 433).

I would like to propose a reading derived from my earlier exposition of the oneness of individual consciousness and historical development implied in the ideal of socialist realism and supposedly perfected in the model of the “new man.” If it is in fact the case that Clifton had no change in belief regarding the Brotherhood’s ideology, that his “complete absorption” held to that level of unity up to this point, then it makes sense to think of Clifton as a manifestation of the “new man,” the exemplary figure all are meant to emulate, whose only cause is the Revolution and whose only criterion of the good is the good of the whole. At some point, something happened—whether it was Ras’s speech or some other event, however large or small—that caused Clifton doubt in the operations of the Brotherhood. But Clifton, as the “new man,” has no daylight between his individual consciousness and the laws of historical development as understood within the logic of the Brotherhood; for him, they are one and the same. Therefore, when Clifton says that a man may have to “plunge outside of history,” he is not *rejecting* the Brotherhood at all. He is embracing the consequences of its ideological totality. With his certainty shaken, his individuality, to the extent it existed separate from the meaning he derived from his faith in the Brotherhood, and his personhood are

obliterated. He must “plunge outside of history” because, in the Brotherhood’s ideology, he ceases to be relevant in the eyes of history at the moment he entertains even the slightest doubt in the dialectical-historical process. All that remains is the street peddler the narrator encounters here, a racist caricature with no interest beyond his own self-interest selling his racist caricature dolls to whomever might listen. In this he becomes the perfect example of Stalin’s castigation of the individual as a form of human being who “only think[s] of their everyday interests, of lightening their labor and of securing some direct and tangible advantage for themselves.”³³

In the words of his songs, the degenerate Clifton provides some implicit evidence that he still operates under the worldview of Brotherhood ideology. There are two verses of song, both of which describe characteristics of the paper doll. Clifton urges purchasers to “shake him, shake him” because you “cannot break him,” an unusual claim to make about a paper doll. But Clifton goes on. The next verse begins with a question: “What makes him happy, what makes him dance?” The answer to this question is deferred to the end of the verse. First, Clifton tells us that this paper dancing doll, this ambiguous symbol which appears like a ghost to haunt the narrator, is “the twentieth-century miracle.”

What in the world could this mean, as Ellison presents Clifton’s performance? Clifton provides some reasons over the rest of the song: “you don’t have to feed him, he sleeps collapsed, he’ll kill your depression / *And your dispossession*, he lives upon the sunshine of your lordly smile / And only twenty-five cents, the brotherly two bits of a dollar because he wants me to eat. / It gives him pleasure to see me eat” (*IM*, 432-33). Not only does the paper doll not need to eat nor need room to sleep, in the world of the song, it only needs “the sunshine of your lordly smile” to survive. Moreover, it labors on

your behalf, killing both depression *and dispossession*, the first condition perhaps vague and psychological but the second resolutely economic and sociopolitical, linked to the ongoing struggle for the liberation of humankind from exploitation and alienation.

Ultimately, the doll's labor, for which it demands no selfish recompense, is the production of food for Clifton to eat. Thus, when Clifton calls the doll the "twentieth-century miracle," what he means is not a stretch to understand. The doll is the image of the "new man," the worker who labors only for the good of the Revolution and the well-being of mankind, producing food that he neither is allowed to nor wants to eat, preferring the pleasure of seeing another eat instead. There is perhaps no more accurate rendering of the Soviet deployment of its own population in light of the "new man" than what Clifton says of the doll: "You simply take him and shake him... and he does the rest" (*IM*, 433).

Moreover, these paper dolls are not merely generic dolls, but "Sambo" dolls, a racist caricature based on a British colonial-era children's-book character.³⁴ At his lowest moment, Clifton also fully descends into a stereotype. Both he and his dolls, as Shelly Jarenski notes, "participate in the blackface minstrel tradition," paradoxically making Clifton seem to become abject to himself.³⁵ The narrator reacts with rage on seeing the dolls, and in his immediate reflections, seems to separate the Brotherhood's ideals from what Clifton has become. "But he knew that only in the Brotherhood could we make ourselves known," he thinks, "could we avoid becoming empty Sambo dolls" (*IM*, 434). But rather than representing a separation from the logic of the Brotherhood, the racism of Clifton's final appearance and the substance of his sustenance reinforces Brotherhood ideology. Almost the first time Brother Jack appears as a named character in the novel, he

insists to a group of Black men playing folk songs at a bar that the singing of Black spirituals and “good ole Negro work songs” constitutes “an outrageous example of unconscious racial chauvinism”—note, *not* anti-Black chauvinism, just generic “racial chauvinism”—and has one of them dragged out by two Brothers for having the temerity to argue with him (*IM*, 311-12).

Though members of the Brotherhood continually and vocally insist on their anti-racism—a worrying sign in itself—the Brotherhood from this point forward makes little secret of their viewing the cause of anti-racism as derivative at best. Not long before Clifton’s disappearance, the narrator is baited by Brother Wrestrum, another Black Brotherhood member, into giving an interview after a rally, which he then uses to levy a variety of nonspecific accusations against the narrator: that he is “using the Brotherhood movement to advance his own selfish interests,” that “he wants to be a *dictator*,” and the like (*IM*, 400-01, emphasis Ellison’s). In response, the Brotherhood’s central committee smoothly reassigns the narrator from Harlem to “lectur[ing] downtown on the Woman Question” (*IM*, 406). In one stroke, the Brotherhood makes three separate identarian attacks. They remove a Black man from work where he interacts with members of his own community; his new assignment puts him in a position where he, a man, is to lecture women about women’s issues; and this reassignment to working on women’s issues is framed as a *punishment* for vague crimes. In the narrator’s major confrontation with this same committee later, defending his decision to hold a public funeral for Clifton, the narrator finally begins to point out how the (all white) Brotherhood members present prognosticate on racial righteousness before getting Brother Jack to admit that he views the Black people of Harlem as “our raw materials,” going further to emphasize that they

are only “*one* of the raw materials to be shaped to our program” (*IM*, 472, emphasis Ellison’s).

To the extent that Clifton’s dolls represent the image of the “new man,” anti-Black racism is certainly compatible with it. Moreover, both his performance and the performance of his caricature dolls, if we correctly understand them as a form of minstrelsy as Jarenski does—implying that Clifton’s Black identity has been bleached out, replaced with a white one, and then covered over with a reductive stereotype—the model of the “new man” in fact *enables* that racism. The “new man,” stripped of personal identity and converted into the “raw material” on which History acts, becomes a mere piece of Soviet Communism’s greater aims—the refashioning of the world. The “Brotherhood of Man,” a term Brother Jack explicitly uses whose racial reductivism has been the subject of regular critical analysis, becomes the sole norm of personhood (*IM*, 310).³⁶ Black identity, in this view, is only so much superstructure, a congealed ideology distorting the true and correct aims of the proletariat class. Any such ideology can only *be* a stereotype, as Brother Jack makes evident at the bar when he declares Black music as such to constitute “unconscious racial chauvinism.” The racial vulgarity of Clifton’s final appearance, and particularly that of his dolls, is the Brotherhood’s final indignity.

The last mention of Clifton in the novel, after the beginning of the climactic Harlem riot that sees the narrator escape to his final underground home, is when the narrator throws Clifton’s paper doll into the fire, alongside several other personal items he has acquired during his journey. There is perhaps, in Ellison’s estimation, no more fitting end for the Soviet “new man.” The narrator, after his experience as Rinehart, and after further conflict with the Brotherhood, eventually breaks his allegiance, successfully

this time, because he has cultivated an individuality of his own. He gives a long eulogy at Clifton's funeral wherein he re-interprets Clifton, seeing in his last act—punching an aggressive police officer in the same fashion that he punched Ras, leading directly to his shooting—as the physical application of “a normal mistake of which many are guilty: he thought he was a man and that men were not meant to be pushed around” (*IM*, 457). The burning of the doll is the final ritual act in the narrator's attempt at salvation. But the image of the beggar Clifton does not depart easily, not least because of the calamity of the fall it represents. It is also, Ellison seems to suggest, the final step in the path of an individual transformed into the fleshy attendant of history, her consciousness made one with its course. To the extent that we find horror in the quest to find the “typical in the individual,” whether it be in the total collapse of an individual who believed her doubts caused history to abandon her or in the bleak omnipresence of eyes searching for deviations and errors, Ellison's critique has succeeded. His ultimate warning is to beware of an ideology that sees in human life nothing more than grist for its mill, working ceaselessly to rectify its own mistakes.

LOVE FOR OTHERS:
James Baldwin and the Problems of Intimate Devotion under the Soviet Gaze

In the previous chapter, I explored the shape and consequences of Soviet theories of the “new man”—the elevated human being transformed in the image of Communism—as they applied to individual life. Ralph Ellison, I argued, focused mightily (through the lens of race in America) on questions regarding how human beings were fashioned and in what ways they were perceptible to others. His theorizing of “variation,” the self-fashioning of individuals directed towards the production of difference, contests several of the key premises of the Soviet “new man” as they applied in literature and other fields of cultural production. In this chapter, I will discuss a variation on this theme: human *relationships*, and the *interaction* of individuals. To do this, I will look at James Baldwin’s work from the early 1960s, completed and published roughly contemporaneously with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. As Baldwin puts it himself, at issue here is “love,” which he understands as the intimate devotion that a person has for a chosen other. At stake, both for Soviet thinking and for Baldwin, is the following problem: *what is the proper object of intimate devotion?*

In this chapter, I argue that in his Civil Rights Movement-era work, James Baldwin, thinking through the lens of race in America, offers a forceful critique of the position on intimate devotion most explicitly advanced in official Soviet ideology. By proposing that some combination of the state, the Party, the Revolution (or revolutionary achievement), and the proletariat are owed not just political loyalty, but moreover the

energies of romantic love [*Eros*] itself, Soviet thinking introduces into modernity a new way of conceiving of both intimacy and the nature of the relationship between individual and political ideology. Baldwin sees a variant of this new conception in the American cultural context of racial conflict, equally represented in both white supremacist normativity and in the apocalyptic political logic of Black separatism, and he views it as an existential threat to civilization. For Baldwin, the only proper object of intimate devotion is a variation of what it traditionally had always been: a chosen other or, more interestingly, chosen *others*.

The idea of giving devotion to a state, of course, is nothing new, and does not originate with the October Revolution. In typical Medieval European political thought, a subject does give devotion to, and can even be said to expect to love, his *regnant*. However, the love relationship between subject and ruler in this ideological frame is conceived as a form of *agape*, equivalent to the love a child has for a parent and (in Christianity) akin to the love between a person and God.¹ As the monarchical political norm began to shift towards democracy in the West, the parental-like love between subject and king transitioned towards a love between citizens: *philia*, or “brotherly love.” One could even call this form of love “comradely,” as it represents a shared feeling between putative equals.

The theorists of the Soviet government began to insist on a different, and in certain ways deeper, form of commitment. A politics based on the supremacy of a “movement,” as Carl Schmitt called it, imagines an ideological engine (usually represented by a “party”) that brings into union the heretofore disparate parts of a polity, namely the “people” and the “state.”² Bolshevism, a movement that sees itself as the

putative vanguard of a triumphant Communism, unites people and state in the pursuit of a transformed, and ultimately liberated, world. Under these conditions, that movement was a deserving, and perhaps the *most* deserving, recipient of the total commitment of any given Soviet citizen. The early Soviet feminist Alexandra Kollontai explicitly identifies the love a citizen ought to have for the movement as “winged Eros” [крылатому Эросу], the committed romantic love normally observed between lovers or marital partners. For Kollontai, not only does “love [possess] a uniting element which is valuable to the collective,” but is also in fact the final evolution of romantic love itself; it “always take[s] precedence” over the love between two persons, and is always “firmer, more complex and organic.”³ Kollontai’s argument is but one variation on a theme that recurs in Soviet thinking about the nature of the relationship between individuals, “the proletariat,” and the Communist movement in general, a theme important enough to close Stalin’s own address to the Eighteenth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

There are two primary texts of Baldwin’s I will consider here, as these represent his strongest contributions towards thinking through the problems at hand in the redirection of intimate devotion. The first is “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind,” a November 1962 essay written for the *New Yorker* and generally known today through the name of the volume which collects it, *The Fire Next Time*. The second is *Another Country*, a wide-ranging novel begun in 1948 but published contemporaneously with the essay in the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement. In these two texts, Baldwin addresses the successes and failures—mostly failures—of a variety of forms of love as manifested in the racial climate of the midcentury United States.

“Down at the Cross” catalogues a variety of failed devotions: Baldwin’s devotion to God and to his father, the American citizen’s devotion to the idea of America, and most significantly the devotion one might show to her race, whether white or Black—Baldwin equally critiques white supremacy and the threat implied by Elijah Muhammad and the Black separatism of the Nation of Islam. In Baldwin’s estimation, each of these devotions courts disaster, either personal or social, when treated as a form of romantic love. *Another Country*, meanwhile, experiments with these problems of devotion by enacting them through the lives of a variety of characters. While the novel too mostly depicts a menagerie of failures, near its end, it finally offers a portrait of successful love in Vivaldo’s two major intimate romantic relationships. The first is a gay relationship with Eric, who is white. The second is an interracial heterosexual relationship with Ida, the sister of the novel’s original protagonist Rufus. This relationship, between Vivaldo and Ida, is chastened and made profound through loss and suffering; it represents the corollary of the relationship between Vivaldo and Eric, which is represented as a transcendental communion of the flesh through sex.

What I think we can rightly identify as a measure of anticommunist liberalism in Baldwin’s approach to the question of love stems from his refusal to be trapped, on the one hand, by normative ideals of monogamy, heterosexuality, and racism; and, on the other, by a totalizing conception of love owed to an ideal, a movement, or an entire collective. According to Baldwin, freedom can be found in the singularity of others and in the power of intimate bonds between particular persons.

I will proceed here by, first, examining the transmutation of *Eros* in Soviet thinking further. This is a complicated task, which involves working through a rich

context: two parallel Soviet theories regarding the nature of the relationship between desire (and sex) and proletarian revolution, their place within the nexus of Stalinist reasoning, and their implications for our understanding of what the Soviet Union wanted when it demanded the faith of its people. These ideas have, at once, serious consequences and a meaningful appeal that cannot simply be dismissed out of hand. I will then turn to Baldwin, looking first at “Down at the Cross” and then at *Another Country*. In my analysis of “Down at the Cross,” I will show how the Soviet reimagining of *Eros* comes to manifest in the various devotions that Baldwin explores there, most specifically in the devotion to race and to identarian race consciousness. I will then use that argument, as I turn to *Another Country*, to examine how Baldwin imagines *successful* intimate devotion in two key cases: both in Vivaldo’s bond with Ida and in his bond with Eric.

THE PARADOX OF SOVIET VULNERABILITY

One of the more peculiar features of many totalitarian governments, and in particular that of the Soviet Union, is the ideology’s simultaneous belief in its own objective righteousness *and* in its constant beleaguerment by enemies both within and without. The Soviet example is the most notable in this regard because in Communism’s final analysis, all contradictions inherent in social life and in human life more generally (all of which are the fault of inconsistencies in capitalism and in all more primitive economic systems) were to be totally resolved. The world would reach its apotheosis in the realization of Communism. Therefore, Communism’s claim on persons is universal, in a way that (for example) Hitler’s Nazism could never be—Nazism’s core racism, an anachronism compared to the competing ideologies of its time, omits *a priori* the

possibility that all living persons could be interpellated by its beliefs.⁴ For the Bolsheviks, the Soviet Union's role as the ultimate world-historical liberator was not only utterly objective, apparent to every thinking person and applicable to all unconditionally, but was moreover a matter of historical necessity: there were not, and could not be, alternate valid paths into the future.

Yet even though the bourgeoisie could not possibly be a real threat to the communist world to come, Soviet ideologists often warned of a proliferation of attempted subterfuge, faithlessness, international aggression, betrayal, and treason. Its agents were what, in this logic, can only intelligibly be described as the forces of evil: those who, like Milton's Satan, were fueled by malice and sought only to poison the good wherever it might exist. Stalin says in his report to the Eighteenth Conference of the CPSU that:

The chief endeavor of the bourgeoisie of all countries and of its reformist hangers-on is to kill in the working class faith in its own strength, faith in the possibility and inevitability of its victory, and thus to perpetuate capitalist slavery. For the bourgeoisie knows that if capitalism has not yet been overthrown and still continues to exist, it owes it not to its own merits, but to the fact that the proletariat has still not enough faith in the possibility of its victory. It cannot be said that the efforts of the bourgeoisie in this respect have been altogether unsuccessful. It must be confessed that the bourgeoisie and its agents among the working class have to some extent succeeded in poisoning the minds of the working class with the venom of doubt and skepticism. If the successes of the working class of our country, if its fight and victory serve to rouse the spirit of the working class in the capitalist countries and to strengthen its faith in its own power and in its victory, then our Party may say that its work has not been in vain. And there need be no doubt that this will be the case.⁵

In fact, according to Stalin, the entire force of the threat to Communism has nothing at all to do with the actual power of the USSR's enemies. Here we see the paradox at work. Communism has come under attack by its enemies, and these acts of aggression are serious enough to demand forceful response, but they ultimately have no effect on the

inevitability of socialism's world-historical victory. Rather, as Stalin says, this threat is directed against the "faith" of the proletariat. But why is *faithfulness*, of all things, so critical to Stalin's analysis here?

The measure of progress towards the communist *telos* is a direct measure of the proletariat's "faith in the possibility and inevitability of its victory." So, it seems to go, the less faith the proletariat has, the further from the *telos*; the more, the closer. There may be retrogression, but there will never be failure. Those acts understood as acts of aggression against the Soviet Union are interpreted as acts of aggression against the proletariat itself, and they specifically take the form of a "venom of doubt and skepticism." The attacks by the forces of evil (read: "the bourgeoisie of all countries and [...] its reformist hangers-on") are attacks on the proletariat's own faithfulness to the Communist movement, enacted and represented by the acts of the Soviet state. Understanding the "threat" Stalin describes in this way can help us clarify the nature of the devotion the Soviet state expects from its citizens.

In *agape*, the form of love identified post-Christianity as the love between person and God (it is also the kind of love present in the parent-child and king-subject relationships), love is mutually unconditional because there is, at the same time, an essential unidirectional element of dependency from a weaker party to a stronger one. The figure parent-king-God, the stronger party, can expect devotion from the weaker figure child-subject-human because it assumes responsibility for that party: it provides care and sustenance (or, in God's case, infinite grace) to a being that has no conceivable way of providing something of any comparable value in return. The devotion at play in *agape*, to be clear, is not *given in return* for this assumption of responsibility; the

relationship is not one of exchange. Rather, faith in this context is held for the *benefit of the devotee*, not the object of devotion. A child must be faithful to a parent for the parent to be able to keep her safe; a human being must be faithful to God not because God somehow needs that faith in order to function, but rather because faith is the only appropriate response to the limitless gift of grace.

In the case of *philia*, “comradely,” “neighborly,” or “brotherly” love, a person is devoted to his equals in pursuit of a common good. As Hannah Arendt describes it in her early work *Love and Saint Augustine*, this type of love emerges out of an originary care for the self: “when I attain the explicitness of my own being by faith, the other person's being becomes explicit as well, in equality. Only then will the other become my brother (‘brother’ for neighbor and ‘brotherly love’ are terms found throughout Augustine's writings). Out of this explicit tie of brotherliness grows *caritas*, which is at the same time a necessity.”⁶ Arendt argues that I come to express this form of love to others out of a necessary commitment to equality, derived from my own attainment of selfhood (because Arendt is interpreting the Christian Augustine, she uses the term “faith” here, though it need not always be.) *Caritas*, or care, is the product of a multi-step process binding persons to other persons on an equal and non-particular basis. As Arendt argues elsewhere, this makes it especially suitable for post-American democratic societies.⁷

I am arguing that the Soviet demand for faith—the proletariat’s “faith in the possibility and inevitability of its victory” under attack by the “venom of doubt and skepticism,” as Stalin puts it—fits neither the model of *agape* nor the model of *philia*. The faith at stake here is a faith in a hybrid of concrete entities and abstractions: a Communist party as a vanguard or appropriate representative for a proletariat, which is in

turn theorist and agent alike of a liberated future world-to-come. Individuals hold faith explicitly for the benefit of the object of devotion (rather than primarily for their own benefit, the benefit of the devotee, as in *agape*), which in this case is either the world-to-come or the proletariat of which the Soviet citizen, as the supposedly-exemplary form of the “new man,” is an intrinsic part: the liberation of the world hinges on this faith. Though universal, this faith also has an element of exclusivity. Attempting to grant the same sort of faith to another entity or concept would not simply be incoherent, as would be, in the logic of Christianity, granting the faith a human being has for God to some idol, but would be a *betrayal* of the Communistic object of devotion. The enemies of Communism, in the form of the world bourgeoisie and its enablers, for instance the Mensheviks and the White Army, attack the proletariat by attempting to lead it from Communism’s path through appeals to self-interest, what we might rightly identify as forms of temptation. We can easily understand how all of this operates in terms of *Eros*, if we think a little colloquially. The bourgeoisie, like a jilted lover, seeks to tempt the proletariat into an affair with individualism to hurt the proletariat’s new spouse, the Communist movement.

When I say *Eros* here, I don’t mean to suggest that the Soviet Union demands of its citizens exactly the same thing we imagine in erotic human relationships: things like sexual desire, fantasy, and the like. Different Soviet ideologists hold a variety of positions on the relative use or disuse of sex to the proletariat in a communist movement. Instead, I am arguing that the sort of devotion that the Soviet Union, and to greater or lesser degrees all kinds of movement-based politics, expects of its adherents shares key features with erotic love, and in particular committed erotic love, like that which lovers and

especially married partners hold for one another. A notion of “energy” is at the root of this conception, some form of immaterial substance that some Soviet thinkers link with human creativity, virtue, and with significant human action.

TWO THEORIES OF SOVIET DEVOTION

In a series of textbooks and pamphlets published roughly between 1925 and 1930, but especially in his work *Sex Education* [половое воспитание], the Russian psychologist Aron Zalkind promoted the most extreme, and therefore most explicit, version of this argument in his “theory of revolutionary sublimation.” For Zalkind, literal “energy” is at stake in sexual matters, and thus the repression of sex among the proletariat could be justified on three grounds: “the welfare of posterity, the proper distribution of ‘class energy,’ and orderly mutual relations within the (proletarian) class.” Any “excessive preoccupation with sexual matters” could be understood as a direct attack on the communist movement, and, moreover, was tantamount to “robbing the revolution” of something owed to it.⁸ Consonant with our understanding of the Communist demand for devotion in terms of *Eros*, thinking in Zalkind’s fashion implies exclusivity, or even a jealousy of attention from members of the proletarian class. It was important that a proletarian feel “closer to the social collective than to the love partner” (Geiger, 86). It was *perhaps* the case that one could give some attention to a partner, but devotion to the partner and devotion to the Revolution had to be considered and evaluated in zero-sum terms on the same scale. In the most explicit terms possible, the personal is political and the political is personal, and specifically the personal, taken to excess, constitutes a betrayal of the political aims of Soviet Communism.

For Zalkind, a proletarian's redirection of erotic energy from "sexual matters" towards revolutionary action follows from all of "the basic principles or criteria of proletarian morality," including but not limited to "collectivism, organization, dialectical materialism, and activism," which are operationalized into something he called "revolutionary expediency" (Geiger, 85-86). Moreover, this transition is not understood to be a novel way of thinking, but rather a form of reparation: the *re*-claiming of something due to the Communist movement that had been seized from it in the past. This force, per Zalkind, is "human creativity." Though more quasi-mystical than we might expect from classical Marxist thought, for the Soviet ideologists the proper orientation of these essential human forces is at the root of Communism's many attempts to shape culture and daily life in the Soviet Union and its satellite states into an approved, orthodox form. There are a limited number of "proper channels" for human creativity, expressed as it tends to be by the young through sex: physical activity, intellectual pursuits, and more importantly political activity. Each of these is understood to be a purifying mechanism for corruptible human tendencies; their intended aim is to prompt the youth to "undertake a task of such proportions that the ascetic heroism of the Revolution, its sense of sacrifice and self-denial, would again be repeated" (Geiger, 88). In essence, the arguments the Soviet ideologists proposed can be understood as similar in form to philosophical claims as old as Plato's *Symposium*, arguing that the human energies of creativity and creation—*Eros*—are of indeterminate character, fluctuating between the base materiality of the mortal body and the purified transcendence of the gods.⁹ But the Soviet model offers a unique contribution to this line of thought by

suggesting that such energies can be properly purified and correctly oriented through devotion to an immanent political *telos*: namely, itself.

The nature of that devotion goes well beyond any simple ends-justify-the-means argument about the relative importance of personal and political ends. For the key Soviet ideologists on the question of love and intimate devotion, a commitment to the proletariat ennobles the individual proletarian who makes that commitment. Though the individual proletarian receives no inherent material benefit from this commitment, in the eyes of these theorists, that individual has transcended biologism and become part of something greater than himself: a part of the engine that will transform the history of the world. As Kollontai puts it, this form of devotion represents an evolution, the end result of a process by which the proletariat “is capable of developing new facets of emotion which possess unprecedented beauty, strength, and radiance.” Kollontai is focused on *Eros*, and specifically what she calls ‘winged Eros’ (in contrast to ‘wingless Eros’ [бескрылому Эросу]): the committed, emotionally weighted love that she most strongly associates with virtue.

Kollontai’s argument, though much less imbricated in sexual conservatism than Zalkind’s, shares his attention to the problem of how human creative “energies” ought to be directed. “The ideal of love-comradeship” [Любовь-товарищество], Kollontai says, “involves the recognition of the rights and integrity of the other’s personality, a steadfast mutual support and sensitive sympathy, and responsiveness to the other’s needs.” Far from being a simple rejection of narcissism, however, Kollontai argues that “love-comradeship,” understood under the aegis of “winged Eros,” is meant to “replace the all-embracing and exclusive marital love of bourgeois culture.” In place of this “bourgeois”

concept, “love-comradeship” foregrounds non-exclusivity: “the aim of proletarian ideology is that men and women should develop these qualities not only in relation to the chosen one but in relation to all the members of the collective.” By framing an opposition between the ideal of “love-comradeship” and something like “marital love” through the logic of class conflict—the governing structural relationship of all human existence within the Marxist frame of reference—she articulates that the kind of love she is advocating is *not* a social love or culture of friendship in the form of *philia*. “Marital love” is meant to give way to the ideal of “love-comradeship.” The two occupy the same space, the space of *Eros*, and compete with one another within human consciousness.

We ought to keep in mind, at this stage, three of the key features of devotion in *Eros*: that it requires sacrifice on the part of the devotee; that it entails the release of “energy,” linked with human creative power; and that it exhibits a demand for exclusivity. The common thread linking these three precepts is the idea that *Eros*-founded devotion requires that the devotee give something either *to* or *for* the object of devotion, with the expectation of suffering real loss in exchange for transcendence—something greater, whatever it may be. In standard marital love, this expectation is (roughly) that a person sacrifices some of his autonomy to his marital partner, under the assumption that the joys of married feeling will overcome the value of the lost personal autonomy. “Love-comradeship,” as we see it in Kollontai, maintains this formula’s structure while modifying a key component of it. The exclusivity presupposed by devotion in *Eros* and the universalism of proletarian class identity do not, on face, seem compatible.

This contradiction—a real contradiction, mind, not a seeming one—can be resolved only by identifying an alternate mechanism by which greater, transcendent

feeling comes to exceed sacrificed personal freedom. As she imagines the process of transition from what she considers a bourgeois form of committed love into “love-comradeship,” she suggests what that mechanism might be:

The blind, all-embracing, demanding passions will weaken; the sense of property, the egoistical desire to bind the partner to one “forever,” the complacency of the man and the self-renunciation of the woman will disappear. At the same time, the valuable aspects and elements of love will develop. Respect for the right of the other’s personality will increase, and a mutual sensitivity will be learned; men and women will strive to express their love not only in kisses and embraces but in joint creativity and activity. The task of proletarian ideology is not to drive Eros from social life but to rearm him according to the new social formation, and to educate sexual relationships in the spirit of the great new psychological force of comradely solidarity.

To reaffirm my earlier argument, Kollontai makes clear that *Eros* is the basis for the new model of devotion that holds her interest here. “The task of proletarian ideology,” she says, is to “rearm [*Eros*] according to the new social formation”: to put it somewhat polemically, to re-cast *Eros* in the image of Communism. But what is most interesting in Kollontai’s statements here is her consistent attention to the problem of the “partner,” specifically in what she calls the “egotistical desire to bind the partner to one ‘forever.’” She constantly alights on the pitfalls of “choosing” a partner throughout her essay, and touts as a benefit of “love-comradeship” that it is an expansive, rather than limiting, form of love. In the passage I cite above, she is careful to say that “respect *for the right* of the other’s personality will increase” (emphasis mine), rather than “respect for the other’s personality,” and suggests that the expressive form of this new, elevated kind of love will not be “only kisses and embraces,” that is, intimate physical contact, but rather *Eros* “rearm[ed],” a militant metaphor, “according to the new social formation,” wherein sexual relationships become derivative of and governed by the principles of the “great

new psychological force of comradely solidarity.” In every case she contrasts partnered love with “love-comradeship,” what is really at issue is the need to replace a love that finds transcendence in the exposure to particularity and perhaps even alterity (in the person of a committed partner) with a love that *produces* transcendence, and does so by binding a person to generality, abstraction, concepts, and structures, such as “comradely solidarity.” If this is the work of a “movement,” to use Carl Schmitt’s term, that work is done by an incredibly elaborate conceptual mechanism. That mechanism offers to the worker a chance to be part of the great march of history towards its resolution, and not just in the form of a foot-soldier or a pawn of a greater cause, but as intimately one with it—with the body of the global proletariat and with the glorious future to come. Despite Zalkind’s sexual conservatism and Kollontai’s feminism, they ultimately converge on the same point: that the interests of the revolutionary proletariat are the primary object of devotion for the worker.

I emphasize these things because it would be a mistake to ignore the real emotional appeal of this new variety of committed love. As we will see as we transition to Baldwin, committed personal love is not without its dangers, and often seems to bear both serious personal risks and the possibility of pain and suffering—as all instances of becoming free do. Zalkind, Kollontai, and other Soviet ideologists working on these questions identify psychological dimensions as key to understanding them. As Arendt points out in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in a twentieth century beleaguered by feelings of alienation, the opportunity to abandon the complexities of one’s individual life for the righteousness of a world-historical cause, one whose effects could potentially linger on forever, perhaps seemed like a worthy exchange to make.¹⁰ The odd sexually-

charged and libidinal images and motifs that tend to arise under situations of totalitarian rule (with Nazism being the clearest example) are a symptom and reminder of the psychological freight of these kinds of choices. Though Communism has been at issue over the preceding pages by being the most explicit progenitor of these ways of thinking, it's worth remembering that these tendencies are not exclusive to Russia and adjacent regions during the time of Soviet rule, nor even to what we have historically identified as totalitarian states. They obtain in many contexts and different situations. Soviet ways of thinking do not necessarily always issue from a Russian writer based in Moscow or in the pages of a Party journal controlled by the CPSU. As we will see in Baldwin's critique of this area of thinking, the soil in which these ideas take root can be more closely associated with a particular national history; a history like, in his case, that of the long shadow of slavery and racial animus in the United States.

ON "DOWN AT THE CROSS": SOVIET DEVOTION AND THE CHURCH

"Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in my Mind" seems to vacillate between the apparent objects of its critique just as it shifts between forms. "Down at the Cross" is simultaneously a personal reflection and a critique of racial animus in America at the time of its composition. As such, it can seem clear-eyed and penetrating at one moment and, to a certain kind of critical eye, saccharine the next. This feature of the essay—which ran 89 pages in its original *New Yorker* publication inclusive of ads—has made it seem to some critics to be indecisive or transitional. When Bill Lyne says, for example, that "Baldwin's bravura faith in an abstract and hypothetical community of relatively conscious blacks and whites is inversely proportional to the evidence he is

increasingly unable to muster for its possibility,” he is observing this problem and giving in to the associated tendency to view it as a self-contradictory document.¹¹ In this reading, “Down at the Cross” is the record of a mind grappling with its inability to accept its own conclusions; the fluctuations in the documents are therefore the visible points where we can observe some kind of transition in Baldwin.

I view this kind of reading as mistaken. The intimate and personal components of Baldwin’s essay, those vulnerable moments interleaved with his more declarative statements, are just as critical to rightly understanding Baldwin’s argument. In fact, those personal moments, I argue, might be understood as the very substance of his argument. At issue for him is something other than a compendium of the acts of white supremacy. Baldwin says as much fairly explicitly: “And I submit, then, that the racial tensions that menace America have little to do with real antipathy—on the contrary, indeed—and are involved only symbolically with color. These tensions are rooted in the very same depths from which love springs, and murder.”¹²

Fundamentally, “Down at the Cross” represents Baldwin’s attempt to grapple with the problems of *Eros*-grounded devotion through the lens of race relations in America. Baldwin’s essay explores—in both an intimate, personal lens and in an analytical lens—two expressions of that form of devotion. The first is the church of Baldwin’s youth; the second is Black separatism, in the form of the politics of the Nation of Islam and its leader Elijah Muhammad. In Baldwin’s eyes, the devotion found in both cases, two devotions towards which he shows real understanding, represent attempts to escape from the deprivation and despair pregnant in the American cultural psyche. Each of these two devotions observes an inherent human energy being corrupted into sex and

criminality; each, like the Soviet models, offers a route to the purification of these energies through the sublimation of the self towards a generalized *telos*. For the church, this *telos* is the broad acceptance of a form of cultural performance that brings about the material success of the church itself (as Baldwin critically sees it). For the Nation of Islam, this *telos* is more political, more concrete, and more severe: the restoration of a world where “Black men ruled the earth and the black man was perfect,” through the retaliatory obliteration of its original destroyers, “the devil known as the white man” (“DC,” 325).

In both cases, the origin of the need for these *teloi* lies in social deprivation, of which the Harlem of Baldwin’s youth provides ample evidence. Baldwin identifies what he perceives to be an ambient hostility, perhaps magnified by the summer heat, in the form of social vice (“the whores and pimps and the racketeers on the Avenue had become a personal menace,” “DC,” 296) and police brutality. At the origin of this hostility, much as in the Soviet case, seems to lie energy—a human energy, undirected but indisputably potent. “The most bewildering aspect” of the pubescent development of girls Baldwin knew, which he links directly to the social climate, “was something deeper and more subtle, in their eyes, their heat, their odor, and the inflection of their voices.” But such energy cannot be left free-floating. It can emerge in sexuality, as Baldwin seems to imply here, or it can be redirected, to extreme result. Baldwin suggests that these “changes” were “more vivid in the boys,” who began to sink into anger and depression related to the indignities Baldwin identifies as being suffered by Black men in American society. These two categories of emotion, for Baldwin, are consumptive, and in his analysis, the Black men he grew up with were being devoured by the energy they produced. However, it is in

the case of the girls, as Baldwin presents them here, that we begin to see the outlines of what the sublimation of these energies might look like. “They began to manifest a curious and really rather terrifying single-mindedness [...] something implacable in the set of the lips, something farseeing (seeing what?) in the eyes, some new and crushing determination in the walk, something peremptory in the voice” (“DC,” 297). Baldwin frames both the original sexualization of these Harlem girls and their eventual manifestation of “single-mindedness” in terms of affect; in both cases is the human energy Baldwin implies present, even if more clearly in the former case than the latter. This is Baldwin’s first assay into thinking through the nature of devotion to the church: the girls chide the boys into thinking about their “souls.”

For Baldwin, one of the “boys” of this vista, the energy at hand channeled into a combination of anger and fear, both of which heightened over the course of this summer. Again, as Baldwin imagines it, this energy cannot be left free floating, nor can it be expected to stay still. It craves a direction, and in his case, “all the fears with which I had grown up, and were now a part of me and controlled my vision of the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me, and drove me into the church” (“DC,” 303). Even in this brief passage, we see a structure of relation: the “wall” of his feelings of guilt and fear are what allow him to be driven into the church. If one passage is blocked, the energy—the mechanism by which Baldwin is driven—must escape a different way. Baldwin suggests a continuity between energy, deep-set feeling, and the church, which combine to suggest the character of his relationship with faith. As he says shortly afterward, “inevitably, that summer, *someone* would have taken me over; one doesn’t, in Harlem, long remain standing on any auction block.” Baldwin’s invocation of the

imagery of chattel slavery (being placed on an “auction block”) in his metaphor intensifies the exploitative character of any sort of institutional relationship developed in this state; commitment turns into a form of seizure and ownership. These metaphors of exclusivity and possession that we can rightly associate, as we have seen, with *Eros* as they apply to strong feeling and the expression of “energy” are the substance of Baldwin’s representation of his psyche at this decisive stage in his life, as he represents it.

We see the force of this escaping energy not long after in the essay, when Baldwin describes a dramatic fainting episode he had during a religious service. In reflecting on this event, Baldwin is interested by the way in which his extremely physical reaction seemed “so pagan and so desperate” (“DC,” 304). Much of the spirituality that Baldwin describes in this first half of the essay, at least while describing his relationship to faith while still within the aegis of the church, shares this quality. This Christianity is far from bloodless; it is, rather, vital, intoxicating, and proximately animistic. Baldwin describes his relationship with “Jesus” (explicitly *not* “Christ”) as intimate: Jesus was his “dearest Friend, who would never fail me, who knew all the secrets of my heart.” Jesus was to offer a kind of intimate domination in this relationship, wherein, with regards to those “secrets” of Baldwin’s heart, “He would never let me find out” (“DC,” 306).

It would not be inappropriate to describe the relationship Baldwin imagines himself having with Jesus to be sensual. Baldwin defines being sensual as “to respect and rejoice in the force of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the baking of bread” (“DC,” 311). Life here has a “force”—energy again—and the expression of that energy is both effortful and immanent. Throughout the entire first section of the essay, Baldwin describes his relationship with the church as one of

devotion. Not a merely habitual or quotidian devotion, mind, but a forceful, animate devotion shot through with deep feeling. Baldwin briefly imagines his devotion as personalized when he invokes Jesus, but on the whole, he describes the transmutation of his energies through communion with a far-reaching, generalist, abstracted, and universal church—put differently, with an institution. Though its ends are different, the structure at hand as Baldwin describes it is like, if not of a kind with, the Soviet ideal of turning one's devotion towards the proletariat. Baldwin breaks away from the church when he describes its hypocrisy with regard to that feeling—how the emotions of the devotees to whom Baldwin would preach were understood to be manipulable and exploitable for material gain. This acceptance of the near programmability of people's devotional response shares much with the performativity of the Communist-era Central European greengrocer, noted by Václav Havel in the essay "The Power of the Powerless," who routinely puts up a sign in his grocery which reads "Workers of the World Unite!" but which neither he nor anyone who regards the sign really *believes*.¹³

Though the failure of devotion to the church, as Baldwin explicates it here, has a relatively significant effect yet limited remit in his own life, it is not hard to imagine more harrowing, wide-ranging consequences. "In the realm of power," Baldwin says, "Christianity has operated with unmitigated arrogance and cruelty—necessarily, since a religion ordinarily imposes on those who have discovered the true faith the spiritual duty of liberating the infidels." This task, born of devotion and rendered extreme through its commitment to the purification of human energies—it "is more deeply concerned about the soul than it is about the body"—leaves a testament of its costs in "the flesh (and the corpses) of countless infidels" ("DC," 313). Whether we choose to imagine the whips and

ropes of the colonizing, evangelizing faithful or not, it almost goes without saying that the stakes of devotion in this register are extremely high. This path to devotion, grounded in *Eros*, for Baldwin has a profound cost in human life, even in human lives.

Baldwin's essay analyzes the church's joining devotion to the accumulation of worldly power. We ought to see in that analysis the same shape we see when Stalin talks about the "faith of the proletariat" in his Eighteenth Conference report. In both we see an institution theorize the idea of the spirit—whether that of the faithful or of the proletariat—as victory embodied, directed towards its ultimate purpose by a vanguard (which happens to be the very same institution that developed the theory in the first place.) The devotee is expected to sacrifice his personality, direct his energies towards a greater mission, encapsulating more than himself. He communes with the institution and, by giving it everything he can, seeks meaning, a place in the world, and a way to understand the course of his life. In this, he is just as the girls of Harlem, who sublimated their sexual energies to become agents of chastity, whose mission is to contain the outpourings of emotion and sexual energies from their young male counterparts on behalf of the Lord. We might imagine, in a different country at a slightly different time, a young Baldwin imagining the proletariat as "my dearest Friend, who would never fail me, who knew all the secrets of my heart."

ON "DOWN AT THE CROSS" II: SOVIET DEVOTION AND BLACK SEPARATISM

Baldwin himself imagines an alternate version of this phenomenon as he turns his attention to the Nation of Islam in the second half of his essay. After all, as he says, it is not hard to understand the appeal of someone like Elijah Muhammad to a person who had

lived through the conditions of Harlem as Baldwin describes them. “Elijah Muhammad,” Baldwin says:

has been able to do what generations of welfare workers and committees and resolutions and reports and housing projects have failed to do: to heal and redeem drunkards and junkies, to convert people who have come out of prison and to keep them out, to make men chaste and women virtuous, and to invest both the male and female with a pride and serenity that hang around them like an unfailing light. (“DC, 316)

The Nation of Islam obviously has a religious component to its program, yet the rhetorical investiture of miraculous power to Muhammad here remains striking. He is not merely a pastor, like the one of Baldwin’s youth, but more akin to a second coming of his namesake, raising men and women out of depravity and purifying them through the aura of his presence. The wretched of the Earth become illuminated beings, near the divine, as evidenced by their being surrounded by a sourceless, self-emanating light. Even the hardened Baldwin, on entering his presence, begins to feel the same things that he felt when he verbally committed himself to the church before the pastor in the first part of the essay. Baldwin “knew how he made me feel, how I was drawn toward his particular authority, how his smile promised to take the burden of my life off my shoulders” (“DC,” 323).

At this point, however, Baldwin begins to observe some of the bizarre effects of Muhammad’s otherworldly power. As Muhammad speaks, the other men present—the devotees—begin to echo him like a chorus, in a kind of call-and-response, as if they were of the same body. When one man responds to Muhammad’s provocations “the white man sure *is* a devil,” Baldwin looks over and notices that the speaker “was a very young man who had said this, scarcely more than a boy—very dark and very bitter,” a bitterness, as Baldwin seems to suggest, incommensurate with his years and therefore his personal

experience. Echoing how he framed the transformation of the girls of Harlem at the beginning of the essay, and thus linking his framing of Muhammad to his analysis of the church, Baldwin says that he “began to see that Elijah’s power came from his single-mindedness” (“DC,” 324). From wherever else power may flow for Baldwin, the key source here appears to be extreme commitment.

Where is that commitment directed? The Nation of Islam program, as Baldwin frames it here, may operate within categories of race, but for him at heart it manifests in a historical teleology driven by the actions of a particular class. The Nation of Islam proffered an understanding of history where, in the beginning, the only men were Black men, who were made in the image of God; “Black men ruled the earth and black men were perfect” (“DC,” 325).¹⁴ Within this logic, white supremacy does not have and never had a governing logic. It was merely a historical aberration, the results of the Devil (whose actions Allah somehow “allowed” and yet at the same time “never approved of”) conducting nightmarish, Lovecraftian experiments resulting in the creation of the white man. These white men, inorganic creatures infernally brought into the world through acts of evil, were granted some number of years to oppress the pure, organic Black men, who represent the good. But for Muhammad and the Nation of Islam white supremacy is not something to be analyzed or critiqued in pursuit of its dissolution. Rather, it is Allah’s will that the rule of white men will wither and that Black men will regain their historical place and, most consequently, their power.

We might accurately take Stalin’s analysis of the bourgeois temptations directed towards the faith of the proletariat, replace “proletariat” with “black man” and “bourgeois” with “white man,” and see, effectively, the same thing that Baldwin

identifies in the Nation of Islam program. In the Nation of Islam's historical logic, all the agency to transform the world back into its purified original state, the form of the good, lies in the hands of Black men and in their faith in the righteousness of their cause and the inevitability of their world-historical victory. The white man, when finally beaten, becomes an entity outside history, malicious to the extent he has delayed the final evolution of the world, and ultimately a surplus person. As Baldwin represents it, "there is thus, by definition, no virtue in white people, and since they are another creation entirely and can no more, by breeding, become black than a cat, by breeding, can become a horse, there is no hope for them," a formulation that Baldwin calls "merciless," empowered by "the explicitness of its symbols and the candor of its hatred" ("DC," 325). On these same grounds, one could plausibly also call it "programmatic" and a "movement politics."

"Programmatic," in large part because of the consistency and totality of its analysis. As Baldwin understands, trying to argue against such philosophies by way of particularity and experience is to miss the point: "All my evidence could be thrown out of court as irrelevant to the main body of the case, for I could cite only exceptions." From its own vantage point, the Nation of Islam's analysis is complete, and cannot be improved upon:

Everything else, stretching back through recorded time, was merely a history of those exceptions who had tried to change the world and had failed. Was this true? *Had* they failed? How much depended on the point of view? For it would seem that a certain category of exceptions never failed to make the world worse—that category, precisely, for whom power is more real than love. ("DC," 328)

At this stage of the essay, Baldwin begins to gesture towards what love *separated* from power might be like, even as he focuses on the machinations of power; that is, devotion

whose object does not have general validity and whose remit is limited to the personal. Baldwin suggests in this passage that, contrary to the Nation of Islam's own analysis, the logic of positing oneself as the vanguard of a supposedly "inevitable" victory over one's enemies grants oneself a dangerous real power over the lives of devotees. Whether it is the residents of a neighborhood (the church), the members of a racial classification (the Nation of Islam and other Black separatist movements), or the citizens of a sovereign state and those of proximate states, and ideally the whole world (the Soviet Union), generality in matters of devotion always puts at risk people who are *not* devotees. Within the logic of these programs and approaches, which re-inscribe *Eros*-grounded devotion, those who disagree with or refuse the movement are, in actuality, attacking the devotees, and they will be overcome. If I might draw a somewhat polemical parallel for a moment: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."¹⁵

In short, Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam as a whole were, for Baldwin, able to create an image of the world that was delimited, straightforward, and gave a spiritual calling to its adherents—one taken at the expense of those deemed extraneous to the march of history. "He was held together, in short," Baldwin says, "by a dream [...] and he was united with his 'brothers' on the basis of their color." He seems to lament this kind of coming together because it fails to be something else: "people always seem to band together in accordance to a principle that has nothing to do with love, a principle that releases them from personal responsibility" ("DC," 333). Here, Baldwin begins to give shape to "love," the force opposed to the generalizing devotion he has spent the entirety of the essay analyzing. Baldwin's sense of love places great weight on the

bearing of pain and the confrontation of difficulty. In describing the role that Black people have played as part of America's spiritual-historical development, he describes the provision of caring discomfort, saying that it "is probably hard and as it may sound, the most important thing one human being can do for another—it is certainly *one* of the most important things, hence the torment and necessity of love" ("DC," 335). We can observe a few features of "love" in this description: hard, yet important; tormenting, but necessary.

Yet the key distinguishing feature, for our purposes, is this: "the most important thing *one human being can do for another*." In this moment, Baldwin defines love, however difficult it may be, as a relationship between two *particular* people, a "one" and "another." This form of devotion is grounded in *Eros*, and it too demands sacrifice between a devotee and an object of devotion—"one can give nothing whatever without giving oneself—that is to say, risking oneself" ("DC," 336). But it is not love for an abstraction, the movement or party that promises the culmination of history and the vanquishing of its enemies, be they the bourgeoisie or the white man. It is love for a specific person, whose specificity brings with it all the complexities and limitations that intimate devotion has historically had. Interestingly, Baldwin does mention the Soviet Union explicitly near the end of his essay:

Behind what we think of as the Russian menace lies what we do not wish to face, and what white Americans do not face when they regard a Negro: reality—the fact that life is tragic. Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that we ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one's death by

confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible to life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return [...] But white Americans do not believe in death, and this is why the darkness of my skin so intimidates them. And this is why the presence of the Negro in this country can bring about its destruction. ("DC," 338-39)

These sentences, and the paragraphs immediately preceding them, are ambiguous and complex. In the preceding paragraph, Baldwin seems to be suggesting both that the "Russian menace" is imagined, a fearful presence in the American imagination similar in form and effect to that of Black persons in America, *and* that Russia is a real threat to the nonwhite persons of the Third World. On the one hand, Baldwin castigates Americans for being "mesmerized" by Russia when, according to Baldwin, the only weapon Russia has in its self-justificatory defense of its moral validity in the face of the abuses it had committed against its own people and the people of neighboring nations was "the moral history of the Western World," a kind of whataboutism that minimizes Russian crimes in the face of American ones.¹⁶ On the other, however, Baldwin blames Americans' "ignorance and indecision" for "the effect, if not delivering them [the "millions of people of whose existence we are scarcely aware"] into Russian hands, of plunging them very deeply into the Russian shadow." This blame derives from what Baldwin specifically understands as America's world-historical responsibility: "we are living in an age of revolution, whether we will or no, and America is the only Western nation with both the power and, as I hope to suggest, the experience that may help to make these revolutions real and minimize the human damage" ("DC," 338). Far from being an aberration, Baldwin's insistence on this idea of America having almost a sacred duty to the liberty of the oppressed persons of the world informs his famous political call to "achieve our country" in the conclusion of "Down at the Cross."

It is difficult to pin down exactly what Baldwin understands the role of Russia to be in the drama he sketches in his essay. But wherever the Soviet Union specifically fits in Baldwin's constellation, it lies very near the core problem Baldwin identifies: that the treatment of the presence of Black persons in America testifies to a reality that white supremacy at its heart refuses to acknowledge, that one cannot escape death, that human life is infinitely fragile before the perturbations of the world. Human beings, Baldwin says, will happily destroy all of the hard-won, but small, transcendences of the mortal life of individuals to try and escape death, willingly giving their faith and devotion to institutions, concepts, and movements that, by their nature, can never die. God and the Christian church; Allah and the fate of the Black race; white supremacy and the imperializing drive of American foreign policy ("DC," 337); the proletariat and the body of Lenin, resting like an incorruptible saint¹⁷ in glass in a mausoleum on Red Square, symbolizing the deathlessness of the Soviet Union's vanguardism—all the same, or at least the same in kind. Not only never die, moreover, but explicitly promise to live forever, to transform reality in its image until the end of the world, and possibly beyond. Intimate devotion to something general, of the sort described ascetically by Zalkind in his "theory of revolutionary sublimation" and as elevated by Kollontai in her "love-comradeship," serves as a temptation in itself to Baldwin, the way a person might seek to flee from reality and death. In this fashion, white people attempt to escape their responsibility towards Black people, and consequently Black people, courted by the Nation of Islam, might decide to abandon their own restraint, allowing the energy bottled up by decades and centuries of white hostility to explode, sinking the ship once and for all.

With that in mind, we reach the aforementioned political call, the single most hopeful moment in a broadly despairing essay:

If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. (“DC,” 346)

We now should be able to see that Baldwin is not calling for some indeterminate, fanciful evolution of mutual recognition between white people and black people. No one thinks Baldwin is that saccharine. He is proffering a possible solution to the problem he has spent his entire essay taking up: that is, the exploitation and temptation of human beings, who fear death and are willing to abandon nearly everything to escape it, by movements and institutions that seek to remake human life in their own image and who peddle a monstrous form of intimate devotion which threatens the beauty and freedom that make human life worth living. Baldwin’s solution is the re-emphasis of the personal and the intimate—not just via a general, philosophical idea of “consciousness” tied to an epistemological mode, but through the specific consciousnesses, individual as they are, of “the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks,” the sort that confound any attempt at coalescing into a general conception of being. In so doing, these persons come together “like lovers”—that is, in the only way that accurately identifies and responds to the problem embodied by “the Russian menace” and “the racial nightmare.” To see concretely what it means for Baldwin to, “like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousnesses of others,” we must now turn to *Another Country*.

The key moment of *Another Country*'s first section can be summed up in one critical line: "Everyone turned to look at them."¹⁸ Baldwin places this line early in the section, in a flashback, where Rufus Scott, a Black man and the protagonist of this section, and Valdo, his white friend / lover and a major character through the rest of the novel, get into a dispute with Jane, a character who Valdo goes on to on-again off-again date. After some nasty back-and-forth in an Irish pub, Jane, a white woman, yells "Are you threatening me?" at Rufus. Jane's statement prompts the key line. The eyes of "everyone," and particularly those of the wraiths of "heavy Irishm[e]n" who appear by the score out of nowhere on the next page to fight them, set upon Rufus and by proxy Valdo; Jane has used her status as a white woman to put the two in incredible danger. Though these eyes are obviously, in part, the physical manifestation of white supremacy, they also have a generalizing character. "Everyone," here, is no collection of individuals; it is a unitary mass, one we can imagine with a single pair of eyes. No amorphous, monstrous union like the "everyone" here, as we explored in the previous section, can see—nor has any need to see—the distinctiveness of individuals. When the mass "looks" at this conflict, what they see is a white woman claiming to have been threatened by a Black man. All the nuance we see as readers, the interpersonal context of the argument between these three, vanishes under a total gaze.

In the preceding pages, I argued that, in the twentieth century, the ideologists of the Soviet Union inaugurated a new way of thinking about devotion. This devotion diverged from the versions of the past in two ways. First, it broke with earlier models of devotion in politics—monarchical and national—by grounding the devotion of the citizen

on *Eros*, rather than on *agape* or *philia*. In so doing, this new devotion created a demand for intimacy and vulnerability; it expected sacrifice and could be betrayed in spirit by its devotees, like a lover, rather than simply confronting possible disloyalty or treason. Second, on top of this, it developed a way for *Eros* to be directed towards something general. This new variant of devotion was not directed towards particular other people, to whom one could sacrifice in order to experience the transcendence of committed love, but rather directed towards the Bolshevik movement and the cause of the proletariat itself—something that a person could not speak to, could not touch, could not hold. This is the effective substance of both Zalkind’s “theory of revolutionary sublimation” and Kollontai’s “love-comradeship.”

Baldwin, in “Down at the Cross,” imagined applications of this version of devotion in his own experience: first in his childhood experience with the church, and second in his more recent encounter with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Baldwin made the case that the drive towards *Eros*-grounded devotion was psychological, rooted in the fear of death and in the great lengths people would go to escape it. Institutional movements like Black separatism, the church of his youth, and the “Russian menace” each, for Baldwin, offered a temptation. Escape death, they offered, by joining yourself to a deathless abstraction, to which you are to grant your whole commitment, before which you are expected to reveal yourself to the depths of your being, for which your faith, and that of the others of your race or class, was the route to the inevitable final evolution of the world. Baldwin showed concern that, in so doing, a person prepared to make this commitment was abandoning everything that made life concrete and meaningful: that is, everything that could be found in concrete intimacy,

concrete sensuality, and in concrete other people, including the achievement of democratic political ends. Though Baldwin gestured towards intimacy, sensuality, and other people as the most able responses to the threats posed by Soviet-esque forms of devotion, he did not show what such things might look like in practice.

In this final portion of this chapter, I will argue that Baldwin provides the first sketches of such an outline near the end of *Another Country*. The novel, published roughly contemporaneously with “Down at the Cross,” tackles many of the same themes and problems as that essay—the wages of racial hostility, the scope and parameters of love, where intimacy is owed, and what ideological temptations people might fall into in their attempts to fill psychological needs. But most critical to the analysis I have conducted thus far is Baldwin’s efforts in “Toward Bethlehem,” the final book of the novel, to portray the unquantifiable value of intimacy between persons and the beauty of commitment to particularity, what he imagines to be the antithesis of the destructive form of intimate devotion he identifies in American white supremacy and in Black separatism, and which I have argued fully developed in Soviet thinking. In this sequence, Baldwin explores the complexities of two intimate relationships held in parallel by Vivaldo: a gay sexual relationship, exalting in its character, with the white character Eric; and a heterosexual interracial relationship, shot through with mourning and the pain of experience, with Rufus’s sister Ida. In these two relationships, Baldwin demonstrates two variants of the devotion towards a chosen other: one wordless and made holy through the communion of the flesh; the other elevated by its confrontation with tragedy and the difficulties of communication between two people. Moreover, beyond simply portraying these two expressions of devotion, Baldwin links them through the same character—

Vivaldo—to show a dimension of freedom within them. For Baldwin, one need not only choose a single other. Instead, one can have *multiple* chosen others to whom one can give intimate commitment, a phenomenon made possible by the breadth of the individual human spirit.¹⁹

The first of these two pairings, between Vivaldo and Eric, begins in a violent ecstasy—a nightmare Vivaldo has. In a “rocky country” juxtaposed against a verdant meadow, dyed in garish saturated colors and with “broken glass glitter[ing] on top of the wall, sharp points standing straight up, like spears,” Vivaldo feels a driving fear (*AC*, 381). In this nightmare, Vivaldo follows Rufus up to a huge stone bridge. There, with Ida looking away, he watches Rufus throw himself off the bridge in an echo of his suicide at the end of the novel’s first chapter, killing himself by “impaling himself on the far, spiked fence which bounded the meadow.” Vivaldo reaches for Ida, but in so doing, causes himself to fall on the spear-like glass. He experiences a bizarre blend of suffering and pleasure: “He could not bear the pain; yet, he felt again the random, voluptuous tug. He felt entirely helpless and more terrified than ever. But there was pleasure in it.” Trapped between fear and ecstasy, Vivaldo faces Rufus: “*Don’t kill me, Rufus. Please. Please. I love you.* Then, to his delight and confusion, Rufus lay down beside him and opened his arms” (*AC*, 382). At this moment, Vivaldo startles from his dream, awaking in Eric’s arms.

This nightmare is but one of several moments in the novel where Eric is associated with ecstatic beauty. The first, a seeming nod to Henry James, comes at the beginning of Book II, where Eric sits with his French lover, Yves, in a still life: a lush French garden (*AC*, 183). In this nightmare, however, the luxuriant sights and sounds of

that garden are exchanged for emotional intensity—the beauty, rather than coming from the plenitude of life in nature, comes from the recognition of its fragility before a twisted, unearthly landscape. And Vivaldo continues to represent this duality of horror and pleasure: trapped between dreaming and waking, he feels a “terrible sorrow” (*AC*, 383).

He feels conflict. But then he looks at Eric:

He opened his eyes. Eric was watching him with a small half-smile, a troubled smile, and this smile caused Vivaldo to realize that Eric loved him. Eric really loved him and would be proud to give Vivaldo anything Vivaldo needed. With a groan and a sigh, with an indescribable relief, Vivaldo came full awake and pulled Eric closer. It had been a dream and not a dream, how long could such dreams last? this one could not last long. Instantaneously, then, they each seemed to become intent on carrying this moment, which belonged to them, as far as it could go. (*AC*, 383).

The “moment,” fragile and rare, emerges at once from both Vivaldo and Eric. As Baldwin represents it, Vivaldo’s entrapment between dream and wakefulness is broken through an embodied, personal, intimate reaction by Eric, “a small half-smile.” This smile, as Vivaldo interprets it, is a promise: one involving devotion on Eric’s part, the self-sacrifice for the sake of the other characteristic of committed erotic love. And it is that promise that allows Vivaldo’s first state of hybrid dream-wakefulness, one of indeterminacy and suffering, to give way to and evolve into the second: the liberation of emotional relief, “a dream and not a dream” that is nonetheless experienced “full awake” and understood to be brief and transient.

To use Baldwin’s famous language from “Down at the Cross,” this moment in the novel depicts the mutual creation of consciousnesses between lovers. Vivaldo emerges into wakefulness and comes to understand Eric, communicating something unspoken but strongly felt. Both alight on the significance of the moment they share at once, but do not do so as indistinguishable parts of a single mass, like the “everyone” from the earlier

scene in the Irish pub. But here, Baldwin seems to suggest an engine driving this process of mutual creation: personality and embodiment. Vivaldo simultaneously emerges from his nightmare-state *and* comes to understand Eric in his wholeness through Eric's smile, "troubled" and thus weighted by experience. As the scene continues, and Vivaldo and Eric have sex without any interrupting dialogue, Baldwin insists on the intensity of their connection. They proceed "saying nothing—what was there to say?" and Vivaldo continues to describe the events occurring "as in a waking dream" (*AC*, 383).

This hybrid state, bringing something together with its opposite in what seems like it should be an impossible union, is the characteristic feature of everything that happens in this scene, and therefore, in the relationship Baldwin imagines between Vivaldo and Eric. Baldwin has Vivaldo put this phenomenon quite directly. When describing Eric's body, Vivaldo describes it as "so like his own, but belonging to another!" (*AC*, 384). Remember from Kollontai that the devotion manifest in "love-comradeship" is one of unification: "however great the love between two members of the collective," she says, "the ties binding the two persons to the collective will always take precedence, will be firmer, more complex and organic."²⁰ There, the devotee gives all to the proletariat, a generalized collective of the laboring masses, while also being part of the proletariat herself. In this way, the devotion she shows consists of total identification, wherein one becomes indissolubly a part of that collective. Here, though, Vivaldo draws likeness between himself and Eric while *at the same time* maintaining difference. Eric's body still "belongs" to Eric and cannot become one with Vivaldo's, even in their moment of ecstasy.

The other characteristic of intimate devotion between persons that Baldwin explores here is, as he puts it in “Down at the Cross,” the act of “risking oneself”—what he says is the precondition of “giving” anything at all (“DC,” 336). “This tormented self-consciousness caused Vivaldo to fear that their moment might,” Baldwin writes, “after all, come to nothing. He did not want this to happen, he knew his need to be too great, and they had come too far, and Eric had risked too much.” This causes an elevation of emotion and a sharpening of Vivaldo’s lust. It, too, takes on a hybrid and expansive character. “His lust was unaccustomedly arrogant and cruel and irresponsible, and yet there was mingled in it a deep and incomprehensible tenderness: he did not want to cause Eric pain” (*AC*, 384). There is a slight echo here between “irresponsible” and “incomprehensible,” making the two components of this feeling coeval without subjugating either. This feeling of lust is not only not purified, as characterizes devotion towards a generality, but in fact cannot be purified. It puts forward and relishes its own indecision; it breaks the “self-consciousness,” read self-absorption, Vivaldo initially feels as he questions the moment he is experiencing before once again committing to it. The intermixture of pain and pleasure that Baldwin represents here, juxtaposing the intensity of seemingly contradictory emotions, produces a moment of significant emotional complexity—the antithesis of asceticism. In every moment of Vivaldo’s and Eric’s sexual encounter, Baldwin emphasizes this duality, one that simultaneously fully exposes the other to the self while allowing it to remain other, to remain in some sense ungraspable and incomprehensible. “It was strangely and insistently double-edged, it was like making love in the midst of mirrors, or it was like death by drowning,” Baldwin has Vivaldo reflect in a stark reminder of Rufus’s suicide. “But it was also like music, the highest,

sweetest, loneliest reeds, and it was like the rain [...] the male body was not mysterious, he had never thought about it at all, but it was the most impenetrable of mysteries now” (AC, 385). The irony of describing the male body in this way, as “the most impenetrable of mysteries, literally while Vivaldo is sexually penetrating Eric, merely emphasizes the vastness of the emotion Baldwin is describing at this moment. It is a place where two opposing things can indeed happen at once.

As the sexual moment ends, the intensity of feeling gives way to calmness—the kind of calmness that can only be earned after the end of earth-shaking intensity. “Then they lay together,” Vivaldo and Eric, “close, hidden and protected by the sound of the rain.” At this point, Baldwin seems to explicitly revise himself from “Down at the Cross”: “The rain came down like a blessing, like a wall between them and the world” (AC, 386). The wall the rain makes between the world and the pair here is evidently and manifestly different from the wall of fear “between the world and me” that drives the teenaged Baldwin into the arms of the church. The “wall” here is framed as a blessing, rather than a curse, or a product of one’s own failings; it comes from without, like grace, rather than emerging out of the necessity of a particular release of emotional energies. And most importantly, it is “between *them* and the world,” the pair in communion with each other, rather than the isolating wall “between the world *and me*” that the Baldwin of “Down at the Cross” faces. The intimate devotion towards the church (or any like institution or movement) preys on fear and relies on loneliness, the alienated person’s need to feel togetherness with *something*, whatever it might be.²¹ But in Eric and Vivaldo’s intense intimate moment, Baldwin demonstrates the raw power of intimate devotion towards a chosen other: one that emphasizes its complexity, that celebrates the

need for connection without exploiting it, and emphasizes an emotional ambiguity wholly antithetical to asceticism, moral or otherwise.

COMMUNION OF LOSS: VIVALDO AND IDA

There are viable alternatives for Baldwin to the ecstatic intimate devotion displayed here. Where the intimate devotion between Vivaldo and Eric has taken flight, is weightless and even angelic, the intimate devotion between Vivaldo and Ida—which comes to a point almost immediately afterwards in this book of the novel—is still viable, yet altogether different. The relationship between Vivaldo and Ida is weighty and material, wrought from tragedy and suffering, and ultimately finds its power in its groundedness. Baldwin makes a point of differentiating these two relationships as much as possible, both substantively and formally, in juxtaposing them. The scene between Vivaldo and Eric unfolds over scarcely six pages, primarily wordlessly, foregoing dialogue for long third-person descriptions. Conversely, the parallel scene between Vivaldo and Ida stretches out for twenty-three, interleaving physical description, internal reflection, dialogue, and narration; the bulk of the section involves Ida's extended recounting of the course of her life since Rufus's suicide near the novel's start. Though I do not have the room here to attend closely to the entirety of Ida's narrative, the fact of her speech—the way she frames her feeling of loss following the death of her brother and her humiliation at the hands of Steve Ellis—has Baldwin gesture towards intimacy through understanding, one where personal harrowing (of the sort Ida experienced) produces vulnerability before another person.

Ida's and Vivaldo's relationship, beginning just after Rufus's suicide, is a consistent point of tension throughout the novel, persistently marked by the complexities of American race relations. Ida begins to develop beliefs somewhat consonant with those of Black separatism: the irredeemability of the white race and of America chief among them. In the course of the novel, Ida takes on and bears a secret: she is having an affair with Steve Ellis, a white advertising executive. Ida is a singer, and Ellis, having power in that industry, promises to help advance her career. Ida's strongly professed belief in the catastrophic failure of white people grates against her purely power-oriented sexual relationship with Ellis. Late in the novel, but before the final book, Baldwin depicts a key scene where Ida and Cass Silenski join Ellis and several of his business associates at a jazz club. At this club, Ida and Ellis dance, and Cass observes the nature of their relationship:

Ida and Ellis had begun a new dance; or, rather, Ida had begun a new cruelty. Ida was suddenly dancing as she had probably not danced since her adolescence, and Ellis was attempting to match her—he could certainly not be said to be leading her now, either. He tried, of course, his square figure swooping and breaking, and his little boy's face trying hard to seem abandoned. And the harder he tried—*the fool!* Cass thought—the more she eluded him, the more savagely she shamed him. He was not on those terms with his body, or with hers, or anyone's body. He moved his buttocks by will, with no faintest memory of love, no hint of grace; his thighs were merely those of a climber, his feet might have been treading grapes. He did not know what to do with his arms, which stuck out at angles to his body as though they were sectioned and controlled by strings, and also as though they had no communion with his hands—hands which had grasped and taken but never caressed. Was Ida being revenged? or was she giving him warning? Ellis' forehead turned slick with sweat, his short, curly hair seemed to darken, Cass almost heard his breathing. Ida circled around him, in her orange dress, her legs flashing like knives, and her hips cruelly grinding. From time to time she extended to him, his fingers touched, her lean, brown, fiery hand. Others on the floor made way for them—for her: it must have seemed to Ellis that the music would never end. (AC, 360)

Baldwin describes this relationship in what seems to be an ever-intensifying sequence of brutal descriptors: “cruelty,” “savagely,” “no faintest memory of love,” “legs flashing like knives,” and the like. Cass proffers the possibility that Ida is here being “revenged”—marking Ida’s intimacy with Steve, to the extent that it exists, as efforts at mutual humiliation. Here Ida, organic and vicious, strikes back against the mechanical Steve, whose every movement is wrought by force of will and nothing else. He has no need for fluency—he, Baldwin seems to suggest, has long acquired enough power, both through his race and through his class status, to view the world as an extractable resource rather than a source of power. Ida here turns the power of the animate earth against him, but impotently: for all of her movements and her successful humiliations, these acts are at best “revenge” or issuing a “warning,” an application of performative humiliation that is not coequal with actual power. To Ida, Ellis is only useful for his connections: he is an avatar of power in her pursuit of a singing career, and she is willing to abandon herself and her dignity in pursuit of that goal. Conversely, to Ellis, Ida is nothing—a sexual object, but little more.

This comes to matter in the “Toward Bethlehem” scene between Ida and Vivaldo, where Ida tells Vivaldo about the events of that night. Cass does not recount what Ida goes on to describe—Cass is that night reaching a head of conflict with Richard, her husband, presumably over her affair with Eric—and leaves the club before this key moment. Ida is made to go up on stage at the club, in front of Ellis and his associates, and sing, backed by Black musicians who had known her brother. She says:

“When it was over, and the people were clapping, the bass player whispered to me, he said, ‘You black white man’s whore, don’t you never let me catch you on Seventh Avenue, you hear? I’ll tear your little black pussy *up*.’ And the other musicians could hear him, and they were grinning. ‘I’m going to

do it twice, once for every black man you castrate every time you walk, and once for your poor brother, because I loved that stud. And he going to thank me for it, too, you can bet on that, black girl.’ And he slapped me on the ass, hard, everybody could see it and, you know, those people up there aren’t fools, and before I could get away, he grabbed my hand and raised it, and he said, ‘She’s the *champion*, ain’t she, folks? Talk about walking, this girl ain’t *started* walking!’ And he dropped my hand, hard, like it was too hot or too dirty, and I almost fell off the stand. And everybody laughed and cheered, they knew what he meant, and I did, too. And I got back to the table. Ellis was grinning like it was all a big joke. And it was. On me.” (AC, 425)

Ellis’s grinning here is his parallel humiliation, one made effective through the use of real power, his own revenge against Ida for the earlier dancing. He is given power here by the nature of his relationship with Ida, of course, but he is also aided by a familiar presence: “everybody.” Here, just as in the Irish pub with Rufus, Vivaldo, and Jane earlier in the novel, “everybody” is a mass, not any number of individual people, with a single will and a single set of eyes. Through the sexualized insults of the bass player, Ida’s earlier organic power is ripped apart. His insults transform her sharpness and “cruelty” into luridity, making her into a degraded sexual object—a “whore”—before the uncaring, unempathetic eyes of generalized, collective judgment. Ida, who had spent the novel exploiting proximity to power, has it turned against her all at once on the basis of her sex.

Ida becomes vulnerable twice over at this moment. First, in this humiliation: she is shorn of every self-protection she has, since Rufus’s death, used to carry on in his wake. Second, in her disclosure: she is at this moment finally confessing her infidelity to Vivaldo. She is left as powerless as it seems possible to be under the circumstances at the end of a long and fraught narrative. It begins with her love for her brother being upturned by his suicide, leaving her to cope with pain—both the pain of his death and of the hostile wages of white supremacy, the daily burden of being Black in America. Finally, and

perhaps most cruelly, she is laid low in the one thing she thought she had left, her singing career, mocked by a backing instrumentalist, humiliated in front of a crowd, and left a joke in front of Ellis, the avenue she thought she had to success—making evident to her that she was *always* a joke to Ellis, that their relationship was decidedly one-sided and that power only existed in one place within it. She lays this all bare to Vivaldo, leaving herself at his emotional mercy.

At first, Vivaldo feels helpless and disgusted, “afraid to touch her” and unable to provide comfort (*AC*, 426-27). In his indecision, he offers to make some coffee, and reflects. Though Vivaldo “felt nothing,” emptied out by this narrative and confession, he begins to connect to the material; Baldwin gives Vivaldo a grounding in the world outside of himself that he is unable to generate from within, either through personal will or through an abstract idea. “The coffee pot, now beginning to growl, was real,” Baldwin writes; “the coffee cups, as he thoughtfully washed them, were real, and the water which ran into them, over his heavy, long hands. Sugar and milk were real, and he set them on the table, another, reality, and cigarettes were real, and he lit one” (*AC*, 427). One after the other, Vivaldo identifies the objects surrounding him in the kitchen as real, like a personal chorus. Though he struggles to find solid ground within himself, the objects of the world, crudely physical as they are, exist—and do so without asking permission, without needing justification from within the human mind. This physicality is quite different from the one experienced with Eric. While there Vivaldo experienced ecstasy through bodily contact, the communion of the flesh linking two spirits together, here Vivaldo connects with the outside world, almost meditatively beginning to notice a reality outside himself through the material objects which make it up. Just as Eric’s half-

smile in the earlier scene was the key allowing Vivaldo to break free of his entrapment between dream and wakefulness, here the recognition of reality makes things “[fall], neatly and vividly, like the tumblers of a lock, into place in his mind [...] it illuminated, justified, clarified everything” (*AC*, 427).

Though Vivaldo here is nominally speaking about realizing a particular solution to a problem he was having writing his novel, his reflections on the character of reality indicate many of Baldwin’s own positions on the complexities of reality. Earlier in the novel, in the moments before Rufus jumps from the George Washington Bridge, he looks down and observes: “He was black and the water was black” (*AC*, 87). Rufus draws a generality—that he and the water below are one, linked by their color; that water is the only blackness that he, a Black man victimized by a white world, can escape into, can use to flee the difficulty of his life. At the end of the novel, Vivaldo proffers the rejoinder to Rufus’s observation while waiting for Ida to let herself out of the bathroom. “He stared into his cup,” Baldwin writes, “noting that black coffee was not black, but deep brown. Not many things in the world were really black, not even the night, not even the mines. And the light was not white, either, even the palest light held within itself some hint of its origins, in fire” (*AC*, 430).

In realizing the complexity of reality, Baldwin is suggesting here, we begin to see exceptions—the very same exceptions which he said seemed powerless when offered before the “single-minded” force of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. Here there are *only* exceptions because all things are mixes and gradations; there is no “main body of the case” nor any simple historical trajectory that it is possible to follow. Though Rufus lost his life to the same fundamental error that Baldwin sees at the heart of the

Nation of Islam and the type of devotion it demands, at *Another Country*'s end, Vivaldo can live the truth. Not a redemptive truth, or a purifying truth, mind, but the truth nonetheless.

All these reflections allow him, after a brief phone conversation with Eric, to reach out to Ida, who had locked herself in the bathroom, and finish their conversation. "He thought to himself that he had at last got what he wanted, the truth out of Ida, or the true Ida; and he did not know how he was going to live with it," Baldwin writes (*AC*, 430). And then, with pain and complication in his heart, he forgives her:

"Vivaldo," she said, wearily, "just one thing. I don't want you to be *understanding*. I don't want you to be kind, okay?" She looked directly at him, and an unnameable heat and tension flashed violently alive between them, as close to hatred as it was to love. She softened and reached out, and touched his hand. "Promise me that."

"I promise you that," he said. And then, furiously, "You seem to forget that I love you."

They stared at each other. Suddenly, he reached out and pulled her to him, trembling, with tears starting up behind his eyes, burning and blinding, and covered her face with kisses, which seemed to freeze as they fell. She clung to him; with a sigh she buried her face in his chest. There was nothing erotic in it; they were like two weary children. And it was she who was comforting him. Her long fingers stroked his back, and he began, slowly, with a horrible, strangling sound, to weep, for she was stroking his innocence out of him. (*AC*, 430-31, emphasis Baldwin's)

Though Baldwin says that this moment was not "erotic," it demonstrates many of the features of *Eros*-grounded devotion between persons: the sacrifice entailed in commitment, and the wearied truths they both had discovered through their mutual suffering; a rush of energy "as close to hatred as it was to love" released, in this case through "kisses" and "weeping"; a mutual vulnerability, from each before the other, consummated through physical touch. Both Vivaldo and Ida, Baldwin suggests, have

come out of this moment different than they entered it: harrowed, worn, and in some respect deteriorated, but ultimately changed by their experience. Though no sex takes place in this scene, Baldwin again invokes an intermixture of pain and pleasure, love and cruelty, in Ida's "stroking [Vivaldo's] innocence out of him" while weeping with "a horrible strangling sound," paralleling the same juxtaposition in the scene with Eric. And as in the scene with Eric, this moment ends to the sound of rain and the quietness of night. Vivaldo also had put on a record by the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. Though this is speculation on my part, in choosing this particular record, in this of all scenes, which happens to involve a Black woman singer, I can't imagine that Baldwin wasn't familiar with how Ralph Ellison wrote about Jackson just a few years earlier: "there are certain women singers who possess, beyond all the boundaries of our admiration for their art, an uncanny power to evoke our love [...] and when we encounter the simple dignity of their immediate presence, we suddenly ponder the mystery of human greatness."²²

Much can and has been written about the evolution of Baldwin's views on the problems of race in America and his political views in general. But Baldwin's deep and careful attention to the problem of devotion—the consequences of giving devotion to sources of power and to uncaring abstractions in the attempt to flee death and suffering, and the necessity, for the sake of human fulfillment, in confronting that pain and suffering directly in the context of *Eros*-grounded intimate devotion to particular chosen others—is a constant. Love, for him, is an expression of dignity arising from "immediate presence" and pointing towards "human greatness," to borrow Ellison's words. No movement, be it Black, Bolshevik, Christian, or the like, can be a proper object of that kind of love. In that sense, all attempts to court devotion for something general, as in

Zalkind and Kollontai's respective theories regarding the proletariat, are fundamentally mistaken because they confuse specific, meaningful terms.

We might profitably concretize Baldwin's critique by comparing it, in brief, to a similar one made much later by Maurice Blanchot: that "Communism, by saying that equality was its foundation and by saying there could be no community until the needs of all persons were *equally* satisfied (this being in itself the minimum requirement), imagines not a perfect society, but the principle of a transparent humanity, an 'immanent' humanity, produced in essence by itself alone."²³ Blanchot goes on to theorize something similar to Baldwin's intimate devotion between persons, what Blanchot calls the "community of lovers," an "unavowable" community which has as a key feature that it cannot appear to the generalizations of politics, that "when [it] dissolves, it gives the impression of never having been, even when it was."²⁴ Baldwin gives a perhaps more concrete image of what this kind of bond entails in "Down at the Cross" and in *Another Country*. It is the drive to imagine, or create, the consciousnesses of others, before the cataclysm wrought by race supremacy finally arrives, and destroys everything beautiful; to recognize the frailty of togetherness and seek to consummate them before they vanish in the sound of rain. But that togetherness and the suffering through which it comes to be is also an expression of strength. Two persons together, whether floating in the ether or standing firmly on the ground, in realizing one another can realize themselves. In so doing, they, and we, can "achieve our country," let this another country become our own, what it was always supposed to be, and begin to become free.

THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PERCEIVE

This book's three previous chapters have engaged in a progressive outward expansion of its themes on two separate fronts. First, they have broadened the scope of their objects of analysis. From Trilling's focus on the constitution of the will, I have moved outward to exploring Ellison's focus on the construction of individual identity, and finally to Baldwin's focus on intimate relations *between* persons. Second, they have each expanded the scope of their understanding of what constitutes Soviet ways of thinking. My discussion of Trilling directly engaged with the theoretical foundations laid by Marx, Lenin and Stalin. My discussion of Ellison treated socialist realist theorists as well as the Communist analogue of the Brotherhood in *Invisible Man*. My discussion of Baldwin, in addition to its reflections on Soviet theorists of love, sexuality, and devotion, examined Baldwin's recognition of the Soviet-like ideological features he saw in both the church of his youth and in the Nation of Islam's Black separatism. This final chapter expands on both fronts one final time. It considers democratic society as such as its object of analysis and reflects on the Soviet ideological features not of a contemporary Communist movement, but of the American neoconservatism of the early and mid-2000s.

In 1995, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the multi-generic writer Susan Sontag gave an interview to the *Paris Review* wherein she describes a "writer" as "someone who pays attention to the world."¹ Whether or not this

characteristic sufficiently defines a “writer” by our lights, under Sontag’s gaze, it becomes a statement of fundamental principle. This principle entails the existential commitment to the act of perceiving reality as it is with the knowledge that to do so completely is impossible. “To *pay attention to*,” that is, to orient one’s subjective perception towards; “the *world*,” the horizon of that perception, which for Sontag is made up of the external universe of objects, other subjects, institutions, cultural norms, and traditions, of which the overwhelming majority are intelligible to, but not fully concordant with, one’s own way of being in the world. What follows examines Sontag’s critical writings—from her early collections *Against Interpretation* and *Styles of Radical Will* to her last works, *Regarding the Pain of Others* and, critically, her mediation on the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, published in the *New Yorker* two weeks after the event. This chapter’s goal is to lay out a framework of a responsibility to perceive as Sontag implicitly theorizes it.

Over the course of her writing career, Susan Sontag develops a framework of thinking about ethical and political responsibility that emerges out of her reflections on the nature of human seeing. Thinking of individual perception, the act of “pay[ing] attention to the world,” in terms of responsibility places it in a unique ethical position: as a bridge between each distinct person and a shared external reality. Transitively, the ground of this external reality enables each person to engage with any other person, in agreement or disagreement, on an equal basis. The capacity for collaborative and contestatory participation is a hallmark of democratic political order. Sontag’s thinking is valuable politically as we navigate over the coming years the (ongoing) legacy of the Trump era and its ideology, which dismembered the idea of commonly accepted factual

validity on the Right. Sontag provides a useful argument for focusing on the repair of that sense of shared reality as a democratic goal. Sontag's analysis also uses individual perception to bridge the apparent gap between questions of aesthetics and questions of ethics—a gap that, to this day, stymies our ability to make sense of how encounters with art produce forms of social understanding. In literary studies in particular, the coalescing of the contemporary debate over the place and nature of “critique,” whether on the side of critique's defenders or its postcritical opponents, tends to cause both this function of the individual to be lost from view and the sense of a “common world,” a reality shared between individuals that allows for both social action and debate, to be eroded. Prioritizing individual perception as a lens of analysis cuts a path separate from and between two problematic positions that tend to emerge in these debates: an over-emphasis on the agency of super-personal forces on the one hand, and an over-emphasis on the importance of inner experience on the other.

Sontag has already identified, and is consolidating her identification of, the association between different ways of thinking about human perception (and attendant aesthetic questions) with ethical positions, ones with immanent political consequences primarily related to the viability of a commonly held reality, by the time she writes her brief essay for the *New Yorker*'s September 24, 2001 “Talk of the Town” section, titled “Tuesday, and After,” in the magazine's first printing following the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York City and in Washington, DC. Over the previous decade, particularly through her engagement with the Serbian genocide in Bosnia, she had done so in the context of ex-Soviet Eastern European states. It is no accident, then, that Sontag makes a pointed comparison in her piece between “the unanimity of the sanctimonious, reality-

concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators in recent days” and “the unanimously applauded, self-congratulatory bromides of a Soviet Party Congress.”² She implicitly asserts throughout her body of work, and makes explicit in this particular piece, that equally recognized, debatable, individual perceptions of a commonly held world are the precondition to a specific political formation, which she calls “mature democracy.” Her concern, conversely, is the possibility of “unanimity,” which she invokes twice in these two successive sentences, and which Hannah Arendt argued marked “in a historical-political sense” the end of the world. The subjugation of individual perception to a political ideology—making a political worldview the precondition of seeing itself—is, as she argues forcefully in this 2001 essay, a major foundation of totalitarian political thought. That problem is at stake for her in the words and actions of the presidential administration of George W. Bush and its media enablers, her central objects of critique.

Neoconservatism, the defining ideology of the second Bush administration and of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that were that administration’s foreign policy legacy, has a well-known developmental history that generally begins with a handful of ex-Communists: Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and the like.³ Whether that ideology is treated as coherent and continuous, running from the 1930s to the early 21st century, or as having some internal variance, is a matter of debate.⁴ But Francis Fukuyama, an important figure in neoconservatism’s late 20th century foreign policy vision (particularly with his “end of history” thesis) himself acknowledges that neoconservatism arose partially out of an “anticommunist Left” that “sympathized with social and economic aims of Communism, but in the course of the 1930s and 1940s came to realize that ‘real

existing socialism' had become a monstrosity of unintended consequences that completed undermined the idealistic goals it espoused."⁵ Fukuyama's definition lays great stress on the disappointment of the "failure" that the Soviet Union seemed to be. He speaks of "unintended" consequences and the "undermin[ing] of idealistic goals it espoused." There is facially little, if any, structural critique of the Soviet Union's ideological direction in this description of the anticommunists' beliefs, only repugnance at Russia's actions—just as Nikita Khrushchev and Lukács espoused when they rejected Stalin's "personality cult" as an anomaly that failed to uphold communist principles.⁶

That neoconservatism retains elements of its Communist origins is visible enough merely by looking at Fukuyama's original 1989 essay. The entire concept of an "end of history" is an idea that was best "propagated" by Marx, drawn originally from Hegel. Moreover, the bulk of Fukuyama's philosophical analysis is based on his reading of Kojève, whose lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, while not explicitly Marxist, emphasized "the elements in Hegel's schemata that influenced Marx's thought," as Kołakowski notes in *Main Currents of Marxism*.⁷ In Fukuyama's book-length adaptation of the essay, he even explicitly says that his "Mechanism," which he defines as the "set of historical first causes that dictates evolution in a single direction," is an "economic interpretation of history" and "a kind of Marxist interpretation of history that leads to a completely non-Marxist conclusion."⁸ This chapter operates on the premise that there does exist a meaningful ideological connection between Soviet Communism and American neoconservatism, and that Sontag's invocation of the Soviet example in her piece is not arbitrary.

For Sontag, humans are thinking beings, each unique in the history of the world in possession of the faculty of judgment. Yet human distinctiveness does not entitle each person to their *own* reality, fashioned by their will alone, free from the influences and preferences of others. But where Marx argued that shared reality was an indication of the force of History in human affairs, “weigh[ing] like a nightmare on the brain of the living,” Sontag’s work suggests that a common world is what makes disagreement and debate—the foundation of democratic society—possible.⁹ She provides a novel position related to the issues at the heart of the critique debates in literary studies: a commitment to the central role of the perceiving individual which, at the same time, is relatively impersonal, foregoing emphasis on the individuality (the subjective experiences) of these perceiving individuals. As applied in both literary studies and in politics, this position is, to borrow Sontag’s words, “defiantly pluralistic,” a legitimately plural and democratic theory of seeing that cannot be reduced to unanimity nor isolationism.¹⁰

Sontag’s “defiant pluralism” is concentrated on the inherent value of engagement with difference in the world, and especially the difference manifest in other persons. The sensibility she valorizes is a change from what she considers older, chauvinistic sensibilities related to artistic merit; it “reflects a new, more open way of looking at the things in the world, our world” (“OC,” 285). Sontag provides a list of characteristics of this sensibility—among them its being “extremely history-conscious,” which will figure later in this chapter. But this description alone provides the key substantives to Sontag’s ideal: “more open” and “our world.” Each of these two characteristics serves as a pole of a reciprocal relationship in the pluralist imagination: the first, the novelty of each

individual human being in the eyes of a common world; the second, the shared obligation of those individual beings to that common world.

Though seemingly very different, these principles, taken together, are the necessary conditions of all relationality between persons, of any possible intersubjective world. Individual distinction without some world in common is solipsism; a common world without some individual distinction is totalitarianism. Sontag's position in this regard contemporaneously aligns her with Arendt and, whether or not she thought of it in these terms, offers a proleptic version of recent scholarship in the tradition of agonistic democracy, where the viability of a common object—a “public thing,” per Bonnie Honig, or the “common world” as such, per Peter Lilja—enables persons the possibility of communicable disagreement with one another.¹¹ In this tradition, that possibility produces the ability to act in concert in public, thus serving as the ground of “democratic life,” as Honig calls it—and even of politics itself. These are the implicit stakes of Sontag's analysis particularly as she approaches the end of her career, and they justify Sontag's significance as a thinker of the political and ethical role of concrete human perception. Moreover, they solidify the sense of Sontag's philosophical standpoint as fundamentally liberal, despite her aesthetic and affective differences from the other writers I've discussed thus far. Sontag, in her early career, never identified as a liberal, and often critiqued elements of what she understood that philosophy to entail: the “organizational impulse” and philosophical feebleness that Trilling had challenged as early as *The Liberal Imagination*. But as Benjamin Moser writes in his biography of Sontag, she publicly repudiated Communism in a famous public appearance at New York City's Town Hall Theatre in 1982, calling it “successful Fascism,” and, in the time

thereafter “became a liberal, that scourge of radicals, right and left.”¹² But more important than whatever her stated affiliations were at any point of her career, one of this chapter’s major arguments is that her philosophy is consistent from beginning to end. Her outlook, as much as Trilling’s, Ellison’s, and Baldwin’s, tells part of the story of the process of becoming free—the practice of *bona fide* democratic life.

For Arendt, the responsibility inherent to pluralism is the result of navigating the balance between these two poles, that of the individual and that of the “common world.” Persons relating with one another must navigate a delicate balance: acknowledging the real differences of outlook between them while yet maintaining that these different outlooks are valid perceptions of something shared or, as the political philosopher Isaiah Berlin put it, that “members of one culture can, by the force of imaginative insight, understand [...] the values, the ideals, the forms of life of another culture or society, even those remote in time or space.”¹³ When either end of this balance breaks down, violence erupts. Inability to respect differences of outlook mortifies the world, cheapening all life in it, in a “historical-political sense”:

In other words, the world comes into being only if there are perspectives; it exists as the order of worldly things only if it is viewed, now this way, now that, at any given time. If a people or nation, or even just some specific human group, which offers a unique view of the world arising from its particular position in the world—a position that, however it came about, cannot readily be duplicated—is annihilated, it is not merely that a people or a nation or a given number of individuals perishes, but rather that a portion of our common world is destroyed, an aspect of the world that has revealed itself to us until now but can never reveal itself again [...] If [...] there were to be some cataclysm that left the earth with only one nation, and matters in that nation were to come to a point where everyone saw and understood everything from the same perspective, living in total unanimity with one another, the world would have come to an end in a historical-political sense.¹⁴

In the contours of Arendt's analysis, the perspectives of different people and, in particular, different cultures make up the substance of the world itself as it "has revealed itself to us." The destruction of human beings not only entails violence against those people—though it also does that, in the form of murder or genocide—but it also entails violence against the world itself, where some part of it "can never reveal itself again." The destruction of different perspectives in this way entails an irreparable loss to the world, whether for better or worse; the destruction of *pluralism*—the conditions under which different perspectives can exist alongside one another—is a catastrophe, tantamount to the end of the world. "Our world," as Sontag puts it, is the product of the various "open" ways of seeing it. *Any* possibility of total unification, no matter how seemingly benign, is an apocalyptic scenario. Likewise, the inability to see the commonality of the world in the light of different perspectives is just as dangerous. It entails violence towards the world itself in the failure to be able to act collectively—and, consequently, breeds apocalyptic scenarios of a more conventional nature.¹⁵

Focusing on and understanding the concreteness of individual perception in and of the world as a prerequisite to systematic thinking helps avoid these sorts of risks. For Sontag, when that concreteness is lost, so too are reality's guardrails; complicated human interrelation, which is dependent on experience, is cheapened into a simplified plan of how the world works and how human beings are meant to act within it. Deborah Nelson provides a basis to understand how Sontag formulates her emphasis on the concretion of the world in a recent analysis of Sontag, where Nelson discusses the concept of "looking at painful reality with directness and clarity without consolation or compensation."¹⁶ Nelson's reading lingers on a key affective word present in this description, its one

adjective: “painful.” That word unnecessarily limits the range of Sontag’s project to the unmediated exposure to trauma as a demonstration of truths that might otherwise be softened, whereas we might better render what Sontag is doing as promoting unadorned perception to establish an image of reality as it is—whatever pain may come from it incidentally. Much more than “looking at painful reality,” we might describe this duty as “looking at [...] reality.”

In her reading of Sontag, Nelson argues that Sontag rejects emotionalism in precisely the same terms that she rejects interpretation in her early essay “Against Interpretation.” The modern age’s “cultivation of feeling, especially extreme states of feeling,” for Nelson’s Sontag, dulled the individual’s ability to respond to works of art: this, for Nelson, was “the most consistent position [Sontag] ever held” (Nelson, 97, 119). In the discussion of “Against Interpretation,” Nelson provides a useful opposition:

While she does question the value of some expressivity, her primary complaint is not aesthetic as a question of beauty (“what does ‘beautiful’ mean anyway?”) but aesthetic as a question of *knowledge*—that is, knowledge through the senses. Feelings are an impediment to feeling—that is, sensation—and thus to knowing what something is and how it is what it is (Nelson, 120, emphasis mine).

Feelings are an impediment to *feeling*. As Nelson describes it, “feeling” equates to sensation, a discovery of knowledge gained through the senses. Such knowledge is necessarily external. Sensation in this sense arises from the exposure of a subject to some object, like a painting or a foul smell. “Feelings,” on the other hand, inhabit the self purely internally. The emotions that occupy a subject’s lived experience might come about because of some external stimulus, but exist independent of it. To build on Nelson’s analysis here, Sontag’s mobilization of “knowledge,” a category inherently linked for her to questions of “quality” and, ultimately, to “truth” itself, allows art to

participate in defining the limits of reality as persons understand them, but only through connection to the objects of the world.¹⁷ Sontag privileges relational experience between subjects and objects over the subject's internal emotional universe; the former entails greater attunement to the world while the latter rejects the world and blunts the ability of a subject to interact with it. The "aesthetic as a question of knowledge" is perception: the subject's encounter with an object that, incorporated into the subject's conscious awareness, alters and shapes that consciousness in a variety of ways.¹⁸

Sontag's critique of interpretation and her critique of "extreme states of feeling" come together on the ground of reciprocal subject-object relations, wherein the existence of the subject and the object have mutating effects on the other. Sontag defines interpretation as "a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain 'rules' of interpretation."¹⁹ For Sontag, interpretation commits its cardinal sin when it causes a dissociation between a work of art and its meaning. Her concrete target is not analysis or understanding as such, but the abuse of the object for secondary purposes: the stable "code" or "rules" applied to an object that will be reshaped in accordance with these codes or rules. The manifest content of the work continues to exist even without the interpretative impulse, and that content—whether it is subject matter, formal features, or even its sensory textures—is always perceived by a mind when a conscious subject is present. The problem, for Sontag, is when (to use somewhat different language than she herself would) the mind fails to *intend towards* the object and instead turns inward upon itself.²⁰ Interpretation cares for neither surface nor depth, nor even something like a Platonic Idea. It drives towards a separate abstraction which circumscribes the work of art, but that the work of art cannot wholly comprise. It becomes an occasion for these

meditations, a byway towards larger concepts or sentiments, an object that exists not in itself but for “arrangement into a mental scheme of categories” (“AI,” 16).

The extreme intensification of feelings commits the same critical error: it “makes art into an article for use” (“AI,” 16), passing through the work of art and subjugating it to something else. But in this case, that “something else” is the solipsistic inner emotional life of the subject. Feelings leap towards the artwork only to spring off it back into the self, sacrificing its fundamental distinctness in order to enable a play of inner experience. The thing itself, the thing which confronts a subject’s sensation, becomes derivative. Instead, Sontag argues, we should concentrate on the object before us in its full particularity, a uniqueness that only becomes evident when subject and object counterbalance one another.

Contra Nelson, the act of exposing oneself as a subject before the full uniqueness of an object in the world *does* constitute a “systematic” approach in Sontag’s thinking, specifically one operative within the domains of metaphysics and epistemology rather than a “mood” engendered by pain (Nelson, 98). For Sontag, every act of perception, including aesthetic perception, entails the equipoise of two beings in relation to the world: a perceiving subject, who observes the object, and a perceived object, whose qualities force the consciousness of the subject to adapt upon being perceived. Sontag claims that “the function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*,” figuring criticism as the concrete elocation of an act of perception within the mind of a particular subject (“AI,” 20). Sontag does not limit the scope of this approach to one that “treats art like a fact and makes criticism into a type of scientific investigation, a Linnaean endeavor in the description of species,” as

Nelson argues (Nelson, 117). Neither “how it is what it is” nor “that it is what it is” describes the act of species classification. Taxonomy is the organization of distinct individuals into a system of hierarchical categorization, the subordination of objects according to a pre-existing schema, though one that does at times adapt. In fact, taxonomy in the Linnaean model is precisely an “arrangement into a mental scheme of categories” of the kind that Sontag specifically warns *against* in “Against Interpretation.”²¹ The intervention of the subject’s conscious perception, which Sontag associates with “criticism,” is the process by which an object can be understood as “what it is” in the first place. If the object were self-evidently “what it is,” or primarily describable by its insertion into a taxonomic order, criticism would have no point: any answers to the questions of “how” and “that” would become immaterial, as they do in the logic of socialist realism. For Sontag, this sort of perception—attempting to see the world as it is—is a conscious act, and moreover, an *act of will*. It includes two tasks. First, one must resist the binaristic opposition “intellect / feeling” in order to turn oneself towards the object in itself, to intend towards it, thus exposing one’s sensorium to that object.²² Second, on exposure to the object, one must be open to “having one’s sensorium challenged or stretched”—the explicit effect and virtue of the “defiantly pluralistic” new sensibility of experience in the world she praises at the end of *Against Interpretation*.²³

Sontag proffers this definition of the “new sensibility,” in fact, on the very *last* page of “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” which is the last page of the volume *Against Interpretation*. She says this immediately after explaining at some length that the incorporation of popular or “low” art into culture “does not mean the renunciation of all standards,” but “that there *are* new standards, new standards of beauty and style and

taste” (285, emphasis Sontag’s). She emphasizes the “are,” the ontological claim, where we might have expected her to focus on the “new”-ness, a substantially second-order claim about cultural change. Sontag’s insistence on the “defiantly pluralistic” as a function of the *expansion* of sensibilities of taste points us towards the first signs of ethical and, ultimately, political consequences for her theory of perception. “There remains an inescapable truth about perception,” Sontag contends in one of the key moments of her relatively contemporaneous *Styles of Radical Will*: “the positivity of all experience at every moment of it [...] there is no such thing as empty space. As long as a human eye is looking, there is always something to see.”²⁴ Sontag nominally directs her comments towards the opposition between silence and sound (non-silence): the fact of human perception, the conscious subject observing the world through her senses, makes sound and silence exist via difference.

Sontag’s emphasis on both the agency and the materiality of the perceiving subject demonstrates the contours of a theory of responsibility deriving out of perception—one derived from the necessity of living together with others in a culture. A focus on “culture” necessarily invokes considerations of aesthetics. We see a similar ethical orientation in the struggle to perceive and to understand in Sontag’s philosophical position (a key commonality with other midcentury liberals) arising out of *aesthetic* sensibility: the world of culture available to human experience. Ever since Benjamin, of course, aesthetics, particularly in relation to politics, has been something of a loaded category to a wide variety of humanistic disciplines. Typically, it tends to be read as facially ideological, and specifically as a throughway to fascism.²⁵ Sontag herself tells us as much: “National Socialism—more broadly, fascism—also stands for [...] the ideal of

life as art, the cult of beauty, the fetishism of courage, the dissolution of alienation in ecstatic feelings of community; the repudiation of the intellect; the family of man (under the parenthood of leaders.)”²⁶ Sontag’s significant difference is her commitment to the distance inherent in perception. “Life *as* art” erases the distance between perceiving eye and aesthetic object; “the fetishism of courage” erases the possibility of action in concert; “the dissolution of alienation” devalues the unique contributions of an individual perceiving eye to the formation of the world, even as part of a collective effort. The distance, but relationship, between subject and object, between individual and universal, preserves the essential complexity inherent to life in society.

At the head of an essay on the director Jean-Luc Godard in *Styles of Radical Will*, Sontag provides an epigraph—one of three, and the only unattributed one among them—from Godard himself:

It may be true that one has to choose between ethics and aesthetics, but it is no less true that whichever one it chooses, one will always find the other at the end of the road. For the very definition of the human condition should be in the *mise-en-scène* itself.²⁷

If we allow that Sontag agrees with Godard’s assessment here, ethics and aesthetics become impossible to disaggregate, though they remain distinct. Aesthetics will always entail an ethics, and ethics an aesthetics, and the contemplation of one will lead inexorably to the other. As such, the act of comparing aesthetic systems will, in one dimension, be an ethical assessment, and as such the examination of aesthetics does not entail subservience to the ideological simplifications of fascism, nor does it mean an escape from politics. This is apparent in her discussion of aesthetic radicalism. For Sontag, radicalism marks the desire for totality and “transcendence,” the abolition of “mediacy” that the radical believes to be the “curse” of art (“Silence,” 293). As she later

points out in “Fascinating Fascism,” this position treads dangerously close to fascism and its “contempt for all that is reflective, critical, and pluralistic” (*LE*, 65). “A radical position isn’t necessarily a forward-looking position,” of course.²⁸ Though true, there is no need to linger on the obvious argument that reaction is capable of being radical. But Sontag doesn’t just argue that. The importance of her argument lies in its methodological presumption. In so arguing, Sontag is able to separate out the etiology of the radical position from the full texture of an ideological stance, be it on the Left or on the Right. And, in understanding radicalism, we are able to see in negative the features of *non*-radicalism. Where radicalism is the pursuit of “successful transgression” and the expansion of the “frontiers of consciousness,” a countervailing non-radicalism emphasizes groundedness in reality, mutual comprehension, and hesitancy concerning professed expressions of “transcendence,” or any Absolute. (“Pornographic,” 328; “Theatre,” 391). Given these valuable features of non-radicalism, negotiation—deciding where the appropriate limits of radicalism are, and what costs and benefits are borne in the testing of the “frontiers of consciousness”—becomes crucial and poses an ethical question in the form of an aesthetic one. Answering them, however partially, demands engagement.

Sontag’s most concrete site of analysis for how this negotiation works, and its relation to the problems of individual perception’s relation to ethical and political contest, comes in her reflections on photography, modernity’s cardinal contribution to the transformation of “ways of seeing.” When she first directs her attention to the problem of photography, she considers it a “new visual code,” a language productive of dynamic change in judgments of both taste and morality for viewers of photographs. She describes

photography as “a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing,” so understood because it permits the reduction of the world into something comprehensible and graspable by individual persons through the accumulation of images.²⁹ To make such a descriptive claim, however, is not to say that such transformations are normatively good. Most of *On Photography*’s project pursues the opposite claim. Sontag argues that photography manifests “aggression” and “didacticism” of an “imperial scope” (*OP*, 532). Further, it at once both desensitizes—“images anesthetize”—and exerts Foucauldian-esque control over how people understand their world, “furnishing a ruling ideology” that advances the soft totalitarianism of capitalistic image “consumption” (*OP*, 542, 654).

The saving grace of the photograph, she contends, is its indexicality: its ability to transmit precisely the character of suffering through images, and thereby incite ethical responses through the exposure of persons to these images. But by the end of her career, in her text *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she recants that part of her argument. Humans are very good at looking away or changing the subject when presented with unmediated horror, Sontag argues. This phenomenon is both the vice and virtue of life in modernity, whose critique coincides with the dawn of modernity itself.³⁰ In the early 2000s context of the book’s composition, television seemed the key medium for this form of human compartmentalization, particularly in the context of the then-newly begun “Wars on Terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq. Sontag combines these new examples with her prior experience during the Bosnian Genocide in the early 1990s to observe about the perception of war in general that “‘We’—this ‘we’ is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don’t understand. We don’t get it. We truly can’t imagine what it was like” (*RPO*, 619). Photography no longer serves as a

faithful, ascetic transmitter of suffering, and therefore no longer prompts a purported “correct” ethical response from the uninvolved public. Even photography’s seeming ability to index has ceased to exist.

At the end of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, amid reconsidering a wide variety of her earlier conclusions about the nature of photographic images, Sontag makes a curious claim about her earlier project’s conception of the ethical character of the “*sense* of reality”:

The view proposed in *On Photography*—that our capacity to respond to our experiences with emotional freshness and ethical pertinence is being sapped by the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images—might be called the conservative critique of the diffusion of such images. I call this argument conservative because it is the *sense* of reality that is eroded. There is still a reality that exists independent of the attempts to weaken its authority. The argument is in fact a defense of reality and the imperiled standards for responding more fully to it. (*RPO*, 609, emphasis Sontag’s)

Though Sontag describes this critique as “conservative,” she does not mean to suggest the critique is somehow Right-leaning. Rather, she roughly means “preservationist”: that there is something integral about the nature of reality itself that is lost, or damaged, by the “diffusion of such images.” She contends here that there is an existent reality whose basic “authority,” its common purchase on the lives of distinct human beings, is being damaged by the “relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images.” Note that the word Sontag emphasizes, the specific component of reality most seriously damaged by this proliferation, is “*sense*.” The “relentless diffusion” of horrifying images “erodes” the human ability to perceive reality through the senses with the full capacity and sensitivity of the human consciousness. That is, it “erodes” the ability *to feel*, in the sense of the “feeling” that Sontag sees as a cardinal good in “Against Interpretation.”

She makes evident her foil immediately, by turning to what she calls the “radical—cynical—spin on this critique”: the postmodern and Situationist belief in the mediatization of all life, where everything has always already been a simulacrum.³¹ She focuses on a critique of what she calls this “Debordian and Baudrillardian” radical stance. The resignation to or acceptance of the destruction of the human ability to feel is, as Sontag describes it, the single greatest error the “Debordian-Baudrillardian” interpretation makes. That interpretation improperly generalizes itself: “it universalized the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment,” and which “assumes that everyone is a spectator.” But, Sontag argues, “it is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people’s pain.” She focuses instead on the “hundreds of millions of television watchers who are far from inured to what they see on television,” those whose own lives may one day intersect with phenomena like war and violence. Specifically, she makes her motivating example the siege of Sarajevo and the Bosnian genocide of the early 1990s; she castigates those intellectuals, who she calls “French day-trippers to Sarajevo,” who exploited the fact of the violence to advance theories of omnipresent mediatization (*RPO*, 610-11).

By juxtaposing these two objects of analysis—the first the general application of theories of spectacle or simulacra, the second the concrete exploitation of the violence in Bosnia, Sontag seems to argue that the photographic event enables *three* different misrepresentations. First, the photograph itself misrepresents what it attempts to capture: the reality experienced by a photograph’s subject remains inaccessible in its total

experiential quality to the photograph's viewer. Second, the viewing of the photographic image misrepresents reality again, by leading to the fracturing of a sense of commonly held reality. Drawing by name on the late Wittgenstein's project in the *Philosophical Investigations*, she claims that, for photographs, "the meaning *is* the use [...]" and it is in this way that the presence and proliferation of all photographs contributes to the erosion of the very notion of meaning, to that parceling out of the truth into relative truths which is taken for granted by the modern liberal consciousness" (*OP*, 603).³² Finally, the theoretical paradigm she associates with Debord and Baudrillard misrepresents reality a third time: by interpreting the relativization made possible by the photographic image as the nature of reality itself. This model allows the Parisian philosophers, for example, to assume that their experience of the Bosnian War—watching televised news coverage of violence taking place—was parallel in kind, or even equivalent, to the experience of a Bosnian living in besieged Sarajevo. Namely: as the intellectual experience of alienation through images, rather than as an actual place that has become the site of systematic ethnic cleansing.³³ For Sontag, the problem of the photograph specifically *is not* that it transforms reality into a strange atmosphere of spectacles and simulacra. The problem is that it provides a justification for people to direct their conduct *as if it had*, freeing them from responsibility towards ongoing concrete horrors.

In this sense, the primary ethical risks posed by the concept of spectacle, as Sontag understands it, are not limited to the abuse of reality (the disconnection between perceiver and reality). They also include the disconnection between what a perceiver understands to be true and how she chooses to act in the world. The title of *Regarding the Pain of Others* is, after all, a verbal phrase; its key subject is perception as an act. And

action, as Arendt theorized it in 1958, constitutes political life: it is “the conviction that man *qua* man, each individual in his unique distinctness, appears and confirms himself in speech and action, and that these activities [...] possess an enduring quality of their own because they create their own remembrance.”³⁴ The problem that Sontag poses is, in essence, determining what happens when that confirmation ceases to obtain. Action, and therefore appearance, is segregated from the distinctness of the person. These are the central problems of her piece concerning the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, and of her critiques of the political and media response to them.

In the days after the attacks, then-President George W. Bush made a variety of comments about the events of September 11 and consolidated them in an address given to an emergency joint session of the United States Congress on September 20, 2001. In her piece, Sontag argues that Bush and his attendant arguments about the causes, nature, and necessary response to the attacks seeks to produce a dangerous “unanimity,” putting at risk the foundations of democracy itself. Whether knowingly or not, Bush’s attempt to appeal to a potential “unity” in the United States relies on a classic totalitarian binary opposition: the axiomatic division of a “we” from a “they,” wherein the “we” represents the hope for the final liberation of the world and the “they” represents a kind of living failure, an ideology that fundamentally has no hope of victory but quixotically persists in attacking the good nonetheless.³⁵ This binary is both defining and determining. “They” are the terrorists, those who “hate what we see right here in this chamber—a democratically elected government [...] they hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”³⁶ “They” hate “us,” a resentment directed by the evil towards the good: hatred and

fear (which Bush, curiously enough, associates with totalitarianism) in supposedly pitched, but ultimately fruitless, combat with democracy, freedom, goodness, and right. However ironic Bush's assertion of a "we" defined by its disagreement may be, this binary enables Bush to divide up the world around two alliances, one aligned with America, and one aligned with "the terrorists": the United States and its friends against its enemies, good against evil. Elided is the possibility that the United States itself is not self-consistent, that it may take its "disagreement" seriously as a lived practice.

The "we" must stand indivisible: a presumption so strong, and so required, that Bush alternates between "we" and "America" as the subject of action throughout his speech. The American "we" begins to show its strain when Bush tries to address American individuals:

We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, we will not fail. It is my hope that in the months and years ahead, life will return almost to normal. We'll go back to our lives and routines, and that is good. Even grief recedes with time and grace. But our resolve must not pass. Each of us will remember what happened that day, and to whom it happened. We'll remember the moment the news came—where we were and what we were doing. (*JS*, 72)

Bush here crushes together two types of "we" in attempting to bind discrete individuals into homogeneity. Alongside but nominally separate from the bravado of an interpellated "we" that will not "tire" nor "falter" nor "fail"—the "we" of the American state and its people projected beyond the water's edge—is a collective "we" that will "remember the moment the news came." Any such experience must be stripped of near-limitless particularity to fuse in this way: the "we" that remembers comprises mothers watching television in private homes, schoolchildren in public institutions, and homeless persons who happened to be walking in front of television stores in cities and counties of

varying distances from New York, to name but a small sample of possible subjects of memory.

To constitute this indivisible “we” requires an object held in common divested of any variation in *how* it is held. As such, television comes to aid once again: the now-iconic image of the North Tower releasing a black smoke plume to the upper left, alternately ten seconds backward or forward from the second plane strike, either with the plane in-frame or having just exploded into the South Tower. Thus participation in Bush’s “we” involves first and centrally the experience of being a media consumer: having seen this picture as it was promulgated in televisual media, seeing the video feed of which it was a part, or receiving word from a person who had. It is, after all, a photograph, whose “meaning is the use,” as she argued in *On Photography*. The exposure to this image, rather than any concrete commonality of lived experience, pastes together Bush’s “we.” It is the substance of the cultural imaginary built by Bush’s speech; it is that which overlays individual subjectivity and creates, out of many differing stories, one.

Bush’s attempt to produce this “we,” this form of American “unanimity,” relies on a specific kind of reception, a story, of an image—a photographic and videographic image, no less. Sontag’s arguments about the nature of the reception of images, therefore, offer an explicit avenue for critique. According to Sontag, the understanding of the now-iconic image of the attacks is, in fact, a “disconnect”: between reality as it appears and the representations that are being provided of it, of the sort she would go on to expand into her argument on the “sense of reality” in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. She says so in the first sentence of her piece:

The disconnect between last Tuesday’s monstrous dose of reality and the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public

figures and TV commentators is startling, depressing. The voices licensed to follow the event seem to have joined together in a campaign to infantilize the public.

The contrast between the event's "monstrosity" and the way that political and media figures "infantilize" the public presents a character of moral outrage, a surface negativity which diverges from her personal reflections on the attacks. But the first sentence is set in passive voice, challenging our initial understanding of the relationship between her subject and object. Seemingly missing from the first sentence's construction is a final, implied, "to me." Were this sentence merely an expression of political opinion, the "to me" would concretize Sontag's subject position, setting her apart from those figures she castigates. Without it, the sentence takes on a generalized cast. Yet neither does Sontag say that "the disconnect [...] *startles* or *depresses*." In this alternate active voice formulation, "startle" and "depress" would set direct agency in the object, here the "disconnect." Instead, Sontag's passive voice, yet subjectless, articulation emphasizes that these two reactions are produced *within* the perceiver's mind, a consequence of its direct exposure to "the disconnect": neither dominated by, nor separable from, it. This perceiver is not simply Sontag herself nor any other particular person, but a general viewer who is believed to have access to a common ability to access some substantive facet of reality. Her outlook is opposed to "infantiliz[ation]" and connected to a public maturity in the form of "mature democracy."

The "monstrous dose of reality," seen through the lens of intellectual maturity, begins to be intelligible in descriptive, rather than strictly moral-evaluative, terms. Disentangled from the reading of it as the unprovoked assault of evil upon the good that Bush deploys in his speech, Sontag can give it a more specific sense: roughly signifying

“extreme,” to better describe a “reality” that, Sontag argues, has its origins in the injustices of American foreign policy and the then ongoing “bombing of Iraq.” Thus when she makes her controversial claim at the end of the paragraph that courage is a “morally neutral virtue,” the one thing she is explicitly *not* doing is what she was most accused of doing: defending the hijackers. She seeks to not to promote amorality as such but, instead, to champion efforts to “describe [an event] accurately,” as Stanley Fish put it at the time.³⁷ She is effectively rejecting the morally ascetic premise that courage must always exist on the side of right, and only on the side of right. Where Bush tries to use the evil of the attacks to attribute condemnatory characteristics to the attackers, describing them as “cowardly,” Sontag places individual perception in the first position, ensuring that reality has some sort of pre-political established ground before judgments begin to draw on it. This amounts to a call for reflection on the part of each democratic citizen, an engagement of public “maturity” dependent on the existence of a world held in common.

Foregoing the possibility that national unity can be produced out of the consumption of images, as Sontag critiques in her piece, would fundamentally undermine the logic of action Bush attempts to justify in the latter portions of his address. It is so essential to his argument that he suggests that it should be obvious: he opens his address by stating that “in the normal course of events, Presidents come to this chamber to report on the state of the Union. Tonight, no such report is needed. It has already been delivered by the American people” (*JS*, 65). This supposed address, delivered by an implied unified American public, is not even lexical: it had been delivered not with words, but with actions. New Yorkers being generous with one another; the passengers of United 93

redirecting one of the hijacked planes away from its target, either the White House or the United States Capitol, and towards a field in Pennsylvania; citizens throughout the country putting out American flags—each of these is taken by Bush to be evidence of the unanimity on which his arguments rely.

Bush's argument is twofold. First, he attempts to produce a coherent American unity out of the crisis setting of the attacks, creating a legitimating mechanism outside of the limitations of law and the procedures of normal governance. Second, he mobilizes this legitimating force to justify the immediate application of overseas military action. In the United States, military action is constitutionally a prerogative of the federal executive branch, under limits set by Congress. The "American people" have no formal legal role in that process, beyond the regular opportunity to select their representatives. In this sense, Bush's invocation of "the people" functions similarly to Carl Schmitt's theorization of the role of "the people" in his trinity of state-movement-people. For Schmitt, "the people are an "apolitical" mass which, when given purpose and structure by the "specially strict organization" and "firm leadership" of a dynamic movement or Party, creates the conditions where "the state must be determined by the political," rather than vice-versa.³⁸ Though Bush relies heavily on "the American people" and, by corollary, "America," he pointedly does not ask *Americans* to do very much. He requests a limited set of personal "sacrifices":

live your lives, and hug your children
be calm and resolute
uphold the values of America
continue to support the victims of this tragedy with your contributions
give [your cooperation to law enforcement]
continue praying (*JS*, 70-71)

Live, hug, be, uphold, support, cooperate, give, pray. Bush does not call for public sacrifice, nor deviation from the usual course of American life, no matter how exceptional the situation facing the United States. In fact, he frames the seamless continuation of daily life in the face of the events as a duty, theoretically performed as to not validate the attackers and submit to “fear,” which is the opposite of “freedom.” For Bush, America is supposed to act decisively on the world stage, all while particular citizens are asked not to deviate from how they live. This particular “we” resolves into a new variation on the national “we” through the consumption of spectacle—the moral failure of neglecting to see reality she critiques in Debord, Baudrillard, and the like. The collective is needed as a giver of blanket consent, not as a subject of political action. The release of citizens from individual political responsibility, refocusing their role into the part they play as one of many components of a world-historical political unity, is another classic totalitarian trope.³⁹ Consequently, the earlier-mentioned invocation-by-comparison Sontag makes with the “self-congratulatory bromides of a Soviet Party Congress” is fully compatible with her earlier career warnings against subordinating particularities to “a mental scheme of categories” (“AI”, 16). The key implication of Sontag’s reference is that the duplicity of the American government and media in the aftermath of 9/11 replicates this insidious feature of totalitarian ideology: the fashioning of a *Weltanschauung* that promises present subjective comfort guaranteed by the inevitable, victorious future. Likewise, the Bush administration transformed the American insistence on diversity into a substantive “belief in freedom,” a tribal identity *per se* opposed to the ideology of “the terrorists” and redeemable through the conviction that “justice will be done” to them (JS, 65). The latter, just as much as the former, rejects

the complexity and foregrounding of social difference at the heart of liberal democratic society.

This impotent “we,” understood through how it ought to have received images, what Sontag calls “confidence-building and grief management” in her piece, rather than its responsibilities as a democratic body politic, which for Sontag entails both “disagreement” and “candor,” consequently lacks the ability to act on its own volition. “America” may, but the American people are not expected to. Into this void of decisive action steps Bush himself, who offers himself as the agent of the American rage he posits on behalf of the unitary “we.” Where he spends much of the speech discussing what the United States will do, in its closing moments, he shifts:

I will not forget this wound to our country or those who inflicted it. I will not yield; I will not rest; I will not relent in waging this struggle for freedom and security for the American people. The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them. (JS, 73, emphasis mine)

God is not neutral, and Bush declares where he stands. *He* will not yield, *he* will not rest, *he* will not relent in waging a struggle—the armed conflict, the undeclared war, which he promises in the name of America. With action by the public ruled out in the speech, that public is called upon to participate in one unspoken request: support the actions that the President is preparing to take on their behalf. It allows Bush, rhetorically, to take the place of America itself through his seamless transition from the non-plural “we” to “I.” Through the consent extracted from the imagined unified American public, Bush, as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, transforms into the sole effective agent of the “justice” he promises that “America” will do.

By contrast, the responsibilities of the democratic citizen become simultaneously more concrete and more coherently justifiable when individual perception is given priority in political thinking, with a world held in common set as the basic precondition of democratic political order. Sontag argues against the possibility of an undivided American unity—an act of imagination that forms an imagined collective ground to justify the coming invasion in a fashion directly contrary to the fundamental characteristics of democracy—through critical seeing and a collective (contestatory) democratic participation. Her critique seeks to pierce through the representations of “reality-concealing rhetoric,” jointly “spouted by American officials and media commentators.” Absent from the *New Yorker* essay is any meaningful invocation of Sontag’s own individuality: except for a single I-sentence in the third paragraph, her observations are all framed in the generalized, third-person language she deploys in the first sentence. The debate she frames, in short, is not between different sets of electoral politics, but between something much more fundamental: two different approaches to seeing, two different normative images of humanity, one associated with “totalitarianism” and one with “democracy.” The former is manipulative and based on representation, while the latter is potentially painful, but honest; is skeptical of representation; and is based on an underlying premise that “reality” as such is worth defending.

In the context of this schema, Sontag invokes “historical awareness” to establish the scope of her question at hand. Problems of factual history preoccupy much of Sontag’s argument in this short essay: what the proximate causes of the attacks may be, and in what ways they may compare to past events. For Sontag, the conflict between truth and lies exists on a deeper register than the particular concern of the attacks. The

“concealment” of reality and the “infantilization” of the public arising out of the media representations suggest the lurking threat of anti-democratic governmental action. For Arendt, “the true opposite of factual, as distinguished from rational, truth is not error or illusion but the deliberate lie”; likewise, for Sontag, the enthusiasm of the government and media for peddling “outright deceptions” points towards the erosion of the ability to perceive reality as such, the same concern she has with “vulgar and appalling images” in photographic dissemination.⁴⁰ The lies attempt to replace a perceptible, jointly-built world with a false, engineered representation of the world.

We need only look back to Bush’s argument: “Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom—the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time—now depends on us” (*JS*, 72). This claim frames the American military response to the attacks as nothing less than the next enactment of “freedom’s” world-historical march against “fear.” When Sontag appeals to history and makes concrete claims about the origins of the attacks and their distinction from purported historical parallels, she does so to strike at the root of Bush’s image of the world. To assert as she does that there is no meaningful connection between Pearl Harbor and September 11th, or that a different foreign policy in the Middle East might have resulted in a different outcome on that day, is to negate the premise that there is an inherent connection between how one perceives the world and how one will, or must, act in it: the freedom bought for the “price” of contingency.⁴¹ Bush brooks no interest in this kind of freedom, the sort theorized by Patočka in his imagination of “life unsheltered” in the *Heretical Essays*, happily trading it for the image of uncompromising moral uprightness: “these demands,” those made to the Taliban in Afghanistan knowing they would not be met, “are not open

to negotiation or discussion” (*JS*, 68). Sontag, conversely, admits of the existential freedom that arises out of negotiation and discussion, even when they are disunifying, disagreeing, and disagreeable, and particularly when they demand the public “bear the burden of reality.”

Whether we like it or not, that burden of reality is irreducible. Among the signal lessons we should have learned from the experience of the twentieth century is that the divestiture of individual persons from the project of understanding the world, whether in aesthetics or in politics, courts danger. In literary studies, that danger is certainly of much lower stakes than its totalitarian equivalent in politics. Nevertheless, it shares the same structure, as an understanding of Sontag’s philosophical position allows us to illuminate—even if the most major risk at hand is merely misunderstanding or confusion. Those of us working in literary studies today generally agree that literature has some inherent value, whether we think that value lies in critiquing existing social formations, imagining new ones, or producing attachments. Any piece of literature is read, as we generally understand reading, by a specific person in a specific context, but is legible outside of that context. To that end, it’s worth being careful about attending to the place of the human being—how individual persons perceive and share their perceptions of the texts they read—when considering the distinctions (where they exist) between form and affect, systematicity and sentiment, or the external and the internal.

For example, Anna Kornbluh wrote in an essay about the imaginative critical capacity of Marxist literary studies:

Where the dialectical conceit of the novel as critique encompasses *both* that the novel makes thinkable the conditions of social relations *and* that a utopian element is consequent upon this thinking, prevailing methods of literary Marxists have often fallen short on both of these counts.⁴²

Even if a “utopian element” (whether that is for good or ill is a separate question) is “consequent” upon the thinkability of the conditions of social relations, it seems important to know: thinkable *to whom*? It means something very different whether the person thinking through the conditions of social relations proffered by a novel is a member of the general public reading after work; a literary scholar whose professional obligation is thinking about those sorts of things; or a Soviet censor in 1956 deciding whether *Dr. Zhivago*’s ideas about social relations are hostile to socialist realism. It means something different altogether if the thinking agent is “Communism,” freed from the inherent partiality of individuals and understood as it conceived of itself at the height of its powers in the Soviet Union in the middle of the twentieth century: an “objective” science of human social life with the unique power to know the course of the future. As Sontag argued in “Against Interpretation,” even the questions of “how” something “is what it is” or whether something “is what it is” aren’t completely settled, let alone the problematic interpretative question of “what [something] means” (“AI,” 20). There can be, and often are, disagreements about what might (in Kornbluh’s terms) constitute a “spatial figuration” or the forms that make it up (Kornbluh, 404). Those kinds of fundamental disagreements are not had between ideologies, which cannot think and therefore cannot converge or conflict. They exist between particular persons, who approach, perceive, and then judge the texts in front of them. These things happen over the course of a distinct, real life, which occurs over time and occupies space. Kornbluh distinguishes critique from postcritique by associating the former with thinking about “what a work does in the world,” and the latter with thinking about “what a work means in the reading chair.” But this distinction is by no means absolute, nor is it particularly

stable. A person can consider “what a work means in the reading chair,” and then get up, go outside, and think about “what a work does in the world,” and maybe even act on some combination of those thoughts, potentially in the presence of other people who have their own sets of thoughts about the work in question. There may be a distinction in concept between the reading chair and the world; there need be no distinction in lived experience.

But neither can the problems of collective life be set aside in favor of individual attachments or “feelings” and their attendant, unconstrained, “imaginative” outbursts, the substance of a rich subjective experience. Sontag explicitly cautions that “feelings” are primarily internal, recursive operations that have no necessary connection to sensation or reality. In his *The Practices of Hope*, Christopher Castiglia suggests a reformed version of critique built upon “idealism,” given force by “imagination,” which attempts to show “how the *unreal* world—the realm of idealism and imagination, of hope—is precisely what makes literary studies valuable, even necessary.”⁴³ But an “unreal” world cannot come from nothing. Turning away from the “real world” (Castiglia’s quotation marks) abdicates the concrete process of changing norms and policies, a vacuum of judgment that specific interested parties are more than happy to fill with a strong answer. As I noted earlier in this book, the Soviet socialist realist writer Aleksandr Fadeev, in a famous toast, described novels and their writers as “engineers of human souls.”⁴⁴ For a writer—*any* writer—to presume the power to “engineer” the soul, they must presume an authority over individual potential readers greater than those readers’ authority over themselves, the exact source of the generative process of “self-fashioning” that Ralph Ellison holds in such high regard. It also denies the object of Lionel Trilling’s focus: the

ability to refuse, to carve one's own path in relation to the wages of necessity. While imagined worlds can sometimes help spur positive change in a less-than-ideal present, they do not consistently do so. The inherent discrepancy between the concrete, but existent, present world and an imagined potential future always poses questions of means: how, precisely, to get from our present into the future. It demands sacrifices on behalf of that transformative process, the kind of devotion to an abstraction that so worried Baldwin in "Down at the Cross" and in *Another Country*. Political imagination, when unchecked by the material constraints of reality, does produce the "engineering" effect Fadeev lauds—it encourages individuals, following their (or something they think is their) imaginations to disconnect from or scorn the complexities of the present so as to refashion themselves in the image of that potential future. Whether or not the Soviet Union was practically effective at producing that outcome during its existence, the danger of this idea remains the same, potentially available in the future to a better-equipped, more advanced movement politics.

In both cases, that of the systematic analysis represented here by Kornbluh and of the disposition towards idealistic imaginative capacity represented here by Castiglia, a similar problem appears. In both cases, the potency of a generality, usually an imagined future, gives a straightforward and consistent ideological purpose to both aesthetics and politics. The complexity entailed in the concreteness of individual human understanding becomes overwhelmed by that simplification of reality. To borrow Sontag's language, ideologies begin to take precedence over individuals, and human beings become "objects of use" for those ideologies' anticipatory purposes. Whether through the dissolution of individuals into a grand teleological force, a "we," or the retreat of individuals into a

solipsistic “I,” the world becomes depopulated. It is emptied of its variousness and rendered incapable of democracy, much to the convenience of contemporary authoritarian leaders, Donald Trump among them.

The response to such a threat lies in the nature of the individual human being, thinking and acting within a common, though difficult, reality. The Belorussian writer Svetlana Alexievich argued that:

It is there, in the live human voice, in the live reflection of reality, that the mystery of our presence is hidden, and the insurmountable tragedy of life is laid bare. Life’s chaos and passion. Its singularity and inscrutability. Shouts and sobs can’t be polished, or the main thing will be neither the tears nor shouts, but the polish.⁴⁵

In Alexievich’s understanding of the history of the twentieth century in Russia, a hidden truth, invisible to the machinations of History in its Soviet interpretation, could be found in the everyday lives of individuals, in their thoughts, their memories, their actions. This truth correlates both to the “live human voice,” something inherently belonging to individuals living amongst one another, as well as the “live reflection of reality.” As she observes, freedom requires “work,” and above all requires “free individuals.”⁴⁶ In arguing all of this, Alexievich alights on many of the same principles that Sontag assumes, and implicitly advances, across the body of her work. Out of Sontag’s insistence on the commitment to individual perception and judgment, namely the responsibility to perceive, democracy emerges as the institutional and social realization of different beliefs coming into conflict about objects, and a world, held in common. At the basis of this ability rests the possibility that different understandings of “how the world looks”, are communicable and thus comparable, and that their commingling makes the world both larger and richer. What makes that comparability possible? *A shared faculty of seeing:*

accessible to all generally but manifest to each individually. That shared faculty of seeing contributes to an “accomplishing subjectivity” over the life of a society whose path is not yet determined. No alternative can take that faculty’s place. The manipulation that occurs when representations obscure feeling (the sensory perception of reality) is, in Sontag’s words, “unworthy of a mature democracy”—unworthy of “free individuals.” Democracy, for Sontag, “entails disagreement [...] promotes candor.” Sontag is confident that human beings are capable of exercising judgment—the bridge between intellect and emotion, built within the full complexity of lived experience, its “shouts and sobs”—including judging where to place politics itself. “Strong” is “not all America has to be,” but Sontag sees no need to provide an answer that human beings are fully capable of coming up with themselves.

CONCLUSION

“I was going to end it like this: when the Inquisitor fell silent, he waited some time for his prisoner to reply. His silence weighed on him [...] The old man would have liked him to say something, even something bitter, terrible. But suddenly he approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses him on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips. That is the whole answer.”—Ivan Karamazov to Alyosha Karamazov, describing Christ’s response to the Grand Inquisitor¹

It’s getting dark. I suppose this tale should draw to its end.

There is an anecdote regarding Václav Havel and the speech he gave to Congress in 1990. Supposedly, a journalist who had been present for the speech afterwards said something to the effect of: “If I could talk like that, I would run for God.”² Havel was, of course, no God; he was a playwright. He had worked in a brewery and was a fan of rock music. He says as much in his speech: “I’ve only been president for two months, and I haven’t attended any schools for presidents. My only school was life itself.”³ Much of that schooling had taken place in the prisons of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, where he was repeatedly incarcerated for “subversion” and other political crimes—incidentally, in large part as a fan of a Czech rock band called “The Plastic People of the Universe,” named for a Frank Zappa lyric.⁴

Earlier, I had discussed a moment from Havel’s speech where he says that he and his country could offer “our experience and the knowledge that has come with it” to Americans, the experience of a “person who cannot move and lead a somewhat normal life because he is trapped under a boulder.” Havel goes on to specify the substance of that

experience and knowledge. He distills it to a “single idea,” what he says is his “one great certainty”:

Consciousness precedes being, and not the other way around, as the Marxists claim. For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility. (Havel, “Joint Session”)

“No one knew what this meant, but it sounded very beautiful,” as the story goes.⁵ But Havel *did* mean something by this. It was important enough to him, in fact, that he thought it to be the summation of his schooling in “life itself,” learned from his philosophical mentor Patočka and produced from his experiences and of the experiences of his part of the world in the twentieth century: the lessons learned in contemplation “trapped under a boulder.” It is the assertion of a normative image of humanity.

The aim of this book has been, in part, to chronicle the ramification of two concepts: Communism, on the one hand, and liberalism, on the other. Though these two terms can refer to a wide variety of different constellations of beliefs and ideologies, I have argued here that the conflict between these two concepts, as they manifested in the reception and critique of Soviet ideology by American liberal critics, are a debate between two normative images of humanity. For the Marxists of Havel’s imagining, the Soviet Communism that dominated Central and Eastern Europe for decades, being precedes consciousness: the material conditions of a human life condition and define the expression of that life and, particularly under Stalin’s gaze, made it manipulable, subject to redefinition by the expression of systematic power.

But liberalism as the writers I discuss here expressed it—at its heart—is a normative image of humanity wherein consciousness precedes being. For Trilling, it is the assertion of a human will that could refuse to acquiesce before the supposedly

objective is inflexible dictates of History. For Ellison, it is the ability to construct a self out of disparate, inconsistent parts that both exceeds the sum of those parts and makes possible a spontaneity that is unaccountable to any rationalized definition of the human condition. For Baldwin, it is the ability to love another person fully, to devote oneself to and sacrifice on behalf of the “consciousness of others,” even without being able to know that consciousness completely as an expression of (what Blanchot calls) an “a transparent humanity, an ‘immanent’ humanity, produced in essence by itself alone.”⁶ For Sontag, it is the ability to see with one’s own eyes, unmediated, and judge for oneself as an equal participant in a democratic society, beholden to both the power and the attendant responsibility of that role. Each of these writers, in their own way, tell the story of what it means to become free. They assert that there does exist something distinctive about human beings that is not only irreducible to their material existence, but also is the precise thing that makes human life precious.

Whatever we call this distinctive thing—Havel calls it the “human heart”—it is not powerful, not as Stalin understands the power of the state to make and direct dialectics. Havel defines the “human heart” in terms of “reflection,” “meekness,” and “responsibility,” none of which connote triumph or glory. It seems to surface most notably in moments of great duress. It is what makes Lorenzo, an Italian civilian worker who Primo Levi describes in his *Survival in Auschwitz* as having brought him bread every day for six months, a constant reminder “by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own [...] something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good, but for which it was worth surviving.”⁷ It also seems to be what is conveyed in Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate* when Yevegnia,

one of the novel's main characters, realizes while waiting in the visitors' line at a political prison: "that the human back could be so expressive, could so vividly reflect a person's state of mind," that "people had a particular way of craning their necks as they came up to the window; their backs, with their raised, tensed shoulders, seemed to be crying, to be sobbing and screaming."⁸

Perhaps most explicitly, this thing seems to be the object at stake for the protagonist, Eve "Evey" Hammond, in Alan Moore's and David Lloyd's graphic novel *V for Vendetta* as she finds and reads a letter from a previous inmate in her prison cell, a letter that causes her to stand firm in her dissent in the face of what she believes to be her own imminent execution:

"It is strange that my life should end in such a terrible place, but for three years I had roses and I apologized to nobody. I shall die here. Every inch of me shall perish... except one. An inch. It's small and it's fragile and it's the only thing in the world worth having. We must never lose it, or sell it, or give it away. We must never let them take it from us. I don't know who you are, or whether you're a man or a woman. I may never see you. I will never hug you or cry with you or get drunk with you. But I love you. I hope that you escape this place. I hope that the world turns and that things get better, and that one day people have roses again. I wish I could kiss you. Valerie. X." I know every inch of this cell. This cell knows every inch of me. Except one.⁹

This "inch" is preserved twice over: first in Valerie's composition of this letter and in her life where she "had roses and [...] apologized to nobody," and second in the subsequent panels, where Evey declines the opportunity to sign a confession statement and, in so doing, accepts death. The language that Moore uses to describe the "inch" parallels that of Havel's "human heart": "small" and "fragile" alongside Havel's "meekness," again not the language of greatness, and yet still "the only thing in the world worth having." But, moreover, Moore frames the "inch" as something inherently retained by the individual,

even when nothing else is, that cannot be taken without consent. It is the only inch of Evey that her cell (and, by proxy, the fascist government of the graphic novel's world) does not, and cannot, know. The inch is a manifestation of the consciousness that precedes being, that cannot be reduced to being; it is human freedom at its most fundamental, the freedom, however "small," "fragile," and "meek" it may be, that can live on even when no other freedom remains. The inch, and the recognition of its significance, is liberalism's heart.

Evey, as we learn in the following pages of *V for Vendetta*, is not actually about to die. She has been subjected to a re-enactment of the prison camp in which V, the masked anarchist revolutionary of the title, had been incarcerated. Evey confronts V, breaking down, screaming at him about the torture he'd inflicted on her in the course of the simulation. She is drawn as gaunt; her hair has been shaved off; she screams that she doesn't want to listen to V's explanation. V replies: "that's because you're afraid, Evey. You're afraid because you can feel freedom closing in upon you. You're afraid because freedom is terrifying." As Evey reaches her lowest emotional breaking point, he goes on and reminds her of the resolution she's already demonstrated: "You were in a cell, Evey. They offered you a choice between the death of your principles and the death of your body. You said you'd rather die. You faced the fear of your own death, and you were calm and still."¹⁰

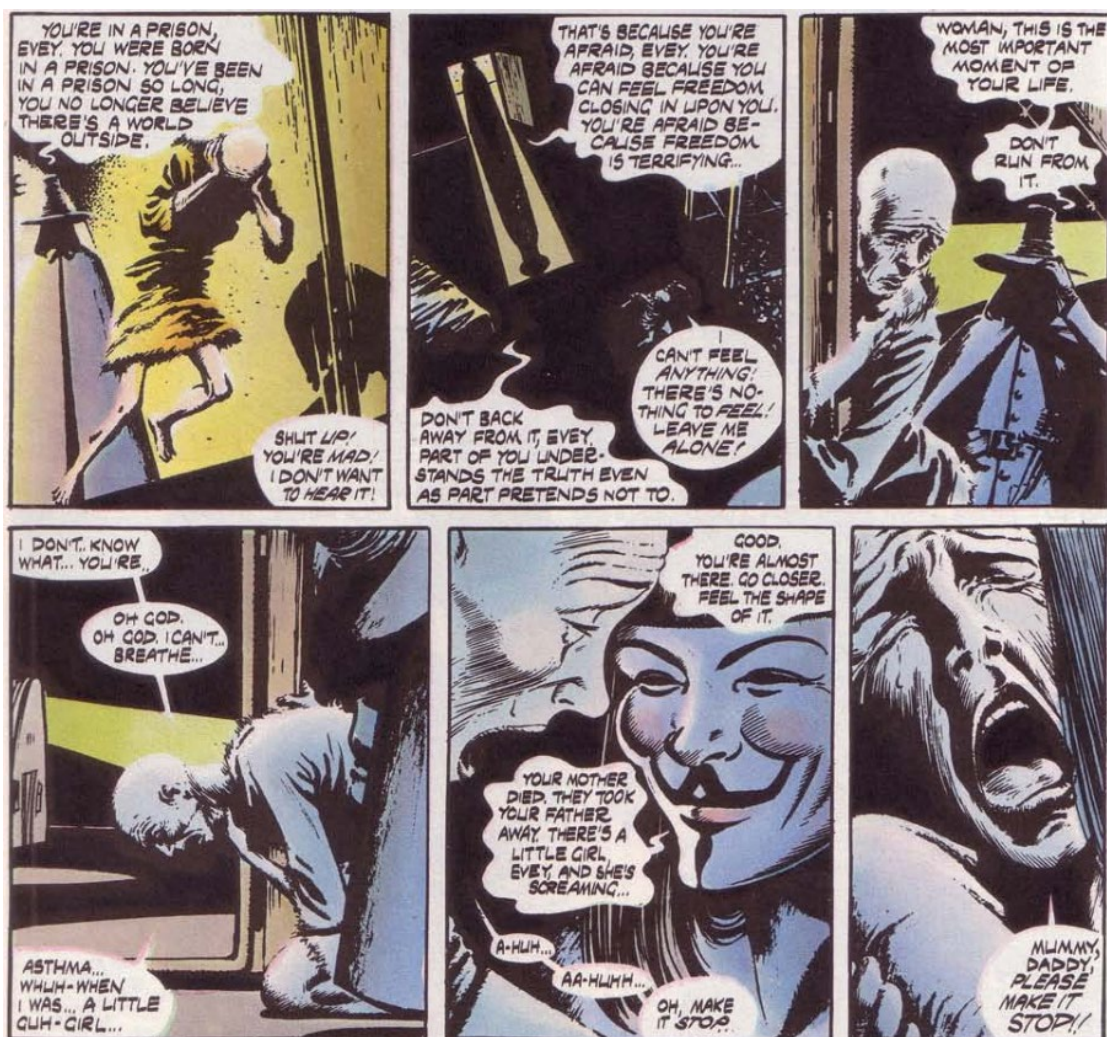


Figure 3 – selection from Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta*, DC Comics, 1990, p. 170.

Moore and Lloyd go to great lengths to juxtapose Evey's physical deterioration, her feelings of desperation, and her state of deprivation alongside V's urging her to accept what she has, in his telling, already undergone when she refused to acquiesce and said she was ready to die: her becoming free. She has done so not in triumph, not in the rain she stands in at the end of this sequence, but rather in the darkness of her prison cell, by herself but at the same time alongside Valerie. In so doing, Moore and Lloyd echo what each of the authors I have discussed here describe: that becoming free, as Havel says, is the province of "reflection" and "responsibility," that it is by no means an easy

path to tread, and often entails suffering that can never really be remedied. It is often accompanied by needless death—Susan in *The Middle of the Journey*; Brother Clifton in *Invisible Man*; Rufus in *Another Country*; the 2,977 victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks—in addition to all the attendant suffering those losses entail. The price of freedom is steep; its costs are real and significant, and we disregard them to our peril.

We do so not only because of the obvious political risks, but also because being in denial about them makes us misunderstand the actual philosophical problem posed by the alternative at issue in this book: the normative image of humanity of Soviet Communism, in which being precedes consciousness. The red banner in the Exclusion Zone promised that Communism was “the bright future of all humanity.” The liberals of this book do not reject that image just because the promise that the Soviet Union made in that banner was a lie, whether any individual Soviet apparatchik or ideologists knew it or not. Thinking in this way reiterates the logic that Communism was a “god that failed,” per the title of Crossman’s volume, that Stalin’s rule was an anomaly that forestalled the achievement of the Soviet Union’s real mission, as Khrushchev and Lukács argued. Rather, the liberals of this book reject the image of Communism’s “bright future” because of the trade that future demands. Soviet Communism offers in “the bright future of all humanity” a world rationalized and made equal, freed of suffering and want, where one truly is what one appears to be, where explanations are readily available, the future is in principle knowable, and commitments can always be based on complete understanding. In exchange, it asks for the inch. It takes away the last and most fundamental measure of the human being’s spontaneity, ambiguity, complexity, darkness, piteousness, variation, perhaps even its brokenness, in order to normalize the future, and thus contain it within

the boundaries of the knowable. It subordinates consciousness to being. In defeating liberalism's normative image of humanity, for these writers, Soviet Communism would trivialize human experience by taking away the right to suffer the burdens of freedom.

But, small and fragile, the only thing that matters, the only thing in the world worth having, the inch endures. Havel says that the "human heart," in all its meekness and responsibility, will be the "salvation of the human world." Havel does not say what this "salvation" will look like. Perhaps it's not even something that needs to arrive. Many years earlier, at the very end of "The Power of the Powerless," Havel asks: "For the real question is whether the 'brighter future' is always so distant. What if, on the contrary, it has been here for a long time already, and only our own blindness and weakness have prevented us from seeing it around us and within us, and kept us from developing it?"¹¹ Though not conventionally powerful, the inch can be strong; it can be resolute.¹² It can refuse to acquiesce in the face of its own destruction, whether that be by the force of argument, as for Laskell in *The Middle of the Journey*, or by firing squad, as for Evey in *V for Vendetta*. It can transform itself, as does Rinehart in *Invisible Man*, and it can love even without knowing, as do Valerie in her letter or Vivaldo in *Another Country*. It can do all these things because the future is not written, and the story is not finished.

The fire is fading. "Darkness will shortly settle. But one day, tiny flames will dance across the darkness, like embers."¹³ Like the embers before us here, growing cold and gentle. I don't know what those flames will bring. Perhaps it's better not to know. It's more interesting that way, don't you think? Whatever happens, I'm sure it'll be a story worth telling.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

¹ Marina Tsvetaeva, “Insomnia. 2. ‘As I love to...’”, trans. Elaine Feinstein, *RuVerses*, <https://perma.cc/8N48-Q3EM>.

² “The Happiness of All Mankind,” *Chernobyl*, created by Craig Mazin, episode 4, HBO, 2019. The sequence I describe here is loosely based on “Three Monologues about a Single Bullet,” a narrativized recollection from Svetlana Alexievich’s book *Voices from Chernobyl*, trans. Keith Gessen, Dalkey, 2005, pp. 96-104.

³ Or, in the anglicization of the Russian, “Pripyat.” In this book, I will default to the Ukrainian renderings of the names of places in Ukraine.

⁴ “1:23:45,” *Chernobyl*, created by Craig Mazin, episode 1, HBO, 2019.

⁵ Craig Mazin, screenplay of “The Happiness of All Mankind,” *Chernobyl*, HBO, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3JK41Ew>, p. 28.

⁶ Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander*, ed. Joseph McLaren, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 14, series ed. Arnold Rampersand, U of Missouri P, 2003, pp. 93, 95-121; Thomas L. Hughes, “Soviet Media Coverage of Current U.S. Racial Crisis,” memorandum to Secretary of State Jean Rusk, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, National Security Files, Civil Rights: General, June 1963: 11-14, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

⁷ China Miéville, *October: The Story of the Russian Revolution*, Verso, 2017, p. 3.

⁸ William Phillips and Philip Rahv, “Editorial Statement,” *Partisan Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, February-March 1934, p. 2.

⁹ Richard Crossman, ed., *The God that Failed: A Confession*, Harper & Row, 1949.

¹⁰ Tony Judt, “Goodbye to All That? Leszek Kołakowski and the Marxist Legacy,” *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, Vintage, 2008, p. 139.

¹¹ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, Oxford UP, 2008, p. 446.

¹² Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, Oxford UP, 1986, pp. 3, 299-301.

¹³ Joseph V. Stalin, “Dialectical and Historical Materialism,” *Stalin’s Master Narrative: A Critical Edition of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), Short Course*, eds. David Brandenberger and Mikhail Zelenov, Yale UP, 2019, p. 272. All further references to this volume shall take the form *Short Course*.

¹⁴ György Lukács, “Critical Realism and Socialist Realism,” *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander, Merlin, 1962, p. 117. Hereafter, I abbreviate this essay “CRSR.”

¹⁵ Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station*, New York Review, 2003, p. 460.

¹⁶ Alexandre Kojève, “Desire and Work in the Master and Slave,” *Hegel’s Dialectic of Desire and Recognition: Text and Commentary*, ed. John O’Neill, State U of New York P, 1996, pp. 64-65.

¹⁷ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, New York Review, 2008, p. xx. Hereafter, I abbreviate this volume *TLL*.

¹⁸ Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, U of Chicago P, 2016, p. 45.

¹⁹ Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Cassirer, Heidegger, Davos*, Harvard UP, 2010, pp. 3-4.

²⁰ Stalin et al., “I. Self-Criticism,” *The Work of the April Joint Plenum of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission*, April 13, 1928, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2008, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1928/04/13.htm>.

²¹ John Locke, “Second Treatise on Government,” *Two Treatises on Government*, 2nd ed., ed. Peter Laslett, Cambridge UP, 2003, p. 269, emphasis Locke’s.

²² Jan Patočka, “The Beginning of History,” *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. James Dodd, trans. Erazim Kohák, Open Court, 1996, p. 49.

²³ Patočka, *The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem*, ed. Ivan Chvatík and L’ubica Učník, trans. Erika Abrams, Northwestern UP, 2016, p. 4.

²⁴ Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” trans. Paul Wilson, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, ed. John Keane, M.E. Sharpe, 1985, pp. 39, 41-44.

²⁵ Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973*, Princeton UP, 2015, pp. 11-13.

²⁶ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, Zone Books, 2015, p. 108.

²⁷ Trilling, *The Middle of the Journey*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, pp. 332-33. Hereafter, I abbreviate this volume *MJ*.

²⁸ Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, Riverhead, 2017, p. 298.

²⁹ Tony Judt, with Timothy Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, Penguin, 2012, pp. 232, 243.

³⁰ Anderson, p. 13.

³¹ Susan Sontag, “Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo” [1993], *Later Essays*, Library of America, 2017, pp. 494-516.

³² Václav Havel, speech to the Joint Session of the United States Congress, 22 February 1990, *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/02/22/text-of-havels-speech-to-congress/df98e177-778e-4c26-bd96-980089c4fcb2/>.

CHAPTER 1: TO NOT ACQUIESCE

¹ The standard narrative of structuralism’s arrival to the United States cites the 1966 “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” conference at Johns Hopkins University as the beginning of that philosophy’s influence in American literary criticism. That said, structuralist ideas had been circulating in local contexts before that (particularly in sociology) and, in a certain sense, that conference can be understood as the moment of structuralism’s death as well as its American birth. See Macksey and Donato, eds., *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, 3rd ed., Johns Hopkins UP, 2007, particularly Macksey, “Anniversary Reflections,” pp. ix-xii.

² Robert Scholes, “The Illiberal Imagination,” *New Literary History*, vol. 4, no. 3, Spring 1973, p. 540.

³ Trilling, “Art, Will, and Necessity,” *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent: Selected Essays*, ed. Leon Wieseltier, Northwestern UP, 2008, pp. 512-13. Hereafter, I abbreviate this volume *MOBI*, and this essay “AWN.”

⁴ In this case, Scholes invokes a kind of whataboutist argument: “The horrors of Nazism and Stalinism have acted as taboo, preventing thought about illiberal alternatives. But by now Dresden and Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Indochina should have proved that Hitler and Stalin held no monopoly on brutality and inhumanity,” p. 534. Another such example can be found in “Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, and the Emergence of the Cultural Discourse of Anti-Stalinism,” *boundary 2*, vol. 20, no. 1, Spring 1993, where Russell J. Reising spends so much of his piece questioning the statistics regarding the scale of mass death in the Soviet Union under Stalin (pp. 111, 115) that multiple review readers for publication interpreted his piece as an “attempt to ‘rehabilitate’ Stalin” (p. 112).

⁵ “Reality in America,” *TLI*, p. 11.

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, 1976, p. 133.

⁷ Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, trans. P.S. Falla, Norton, 2005, p. 329.

⁸ Marx’s earliest articulation of this distinction appears in Marx, preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Maurice Dobb, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya, Progress Publishers, 1977, pp. 20-21.

⁹ Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” [1845], *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker, Norton, 1978, p. 145. Hereafter, I abbreviate this volume *MER*.

¹⁰ Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” *MER*, p. 595.

¹¹ Vladimir I. Lenin, “The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social Democrats,” *What Is to Be Done?* [1902], trans. George Fineberg and George Hanna, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 1961, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm>, emphasis Lenin’s. This chapter of the book takes as its explicit target the newspaper Рабочее дело [The Workers’ Cause], an organ of the Union of Russian Social-Democrats Abroad.

¹² Lenin, *ibid.*

¹³ Trilling, “The Meaning of a Literary Idea,” *TLI*, p. 284.

¹⁴ The importance of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* to the development of Soviet ideology is hard to overstate. Stalin praises it by name repeatedly in—including in the very last sentence of—“Dialectical and Historical Materialism,” the key theoretical

essay in the most important book in the Soviet Union from 1938-1956, which I will discuss momentarily.

¹⁵ A good early history of this document can be found in Paul H. Avrich, “The *Short Course* and Soviet Historiography,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 4, 1960, pp. 539-553. In 2019 David Brandenberger and Mikhail Zelenov published a critical edition of the *Short Course*, from which I draw my quotations herein.

¹⁶ Brandenberger and Zelenov, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Short Course*, p. 1.

¹⁷ Avrich, pp. 541-42.

¹⁸ Stalin, “Dialectical and Historical Materialism,” *Short Course*, p. 248.

¹⁹ Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” *MER*, p. 474.

²⁰ Brandenberger and Zelenov mention in a footnote that earlier versions of this line gender nature, reading “men carry on a struggle against nature and utilize *her* for the production of material values,” which makes quite clear the kind of violent relationship Stalin wanted to use as a model for the human / nature relationship. See Brandenberger and Zelenov, p. 689, note 29.

²¹ Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program,” *MER*, p. 531. As understood by Marx, this formulation allows for “funds for those unable to work” (p. 529) and other such structures of relief.

²² Isaiah Berlin, “The Artificial Dialectic: Generalissimo Stalin and the Art of Government” [1952], *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture under Communism*, ed. Henry Hardy, Brookings, 2016, p. 101.

²³ Trilling, “*The Princess Casamassima*,” *TLI*, p. 80. Hereafter, I abbreviate this essay “PC.”

²⁴ Michaela Bronstein, “‘The Princess’ among the Polemicists: Aesthetics and Protest at Midcentury,” *American Literary History*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2017, p. 36.

²⁵ Jan Patočka, “Europe and the European Heritage until the End of the Nineteenth Century,” *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. James Dodd, trans. Erazim Kohák, Open Court, 1996, p. 91.

²⁶ “At its center was the belief that the Soviet Union had resolved all social and political contradictions and was well on the way toward realizing the highest possibilities of human life [...] the position of the Stalinist intellectuals of the West was not, in any true conception of politics, a political position at all but, rather, the expression of a settled

disgust with politics, or at least with what politics entails of contingency, vigilance, and effort.” “AWN,” pp. 510-11.

²⁷ One model we can use to think about Trilling’s reflections on Europe in “The Princess Casamassima” is Rodolphe Gasché’s reading of Patočka, where he argues that for Patočka the concept of “care of the soul,” which is “the project of a life in a breakaway from the natural temptations that the first [the “fusion with roots”] or the second [“the inauthentic mode of being in everydayness”] movement provide—that is, a life in its own right, independent, however fragile, from nature,” constitutes “the embryonic idea of Europe” (221). Though Trilling would likely take issue with the Christianization of this language, as well as the hard distinction Patočka seems to draw between human life and nature, there is much in this summation of Patočka’s concept that harmonizes with Trilling’s concept of human life, separate from but in some sense bound by nature, realized through the process of living and acting in spite of these constraints. Whether Europe-the-continent is “passing over into rottenness,” *The Princess Casamassima*, for Trilling, seems to be asserting a “moral realism” (“PC,” 89) in the story of Hyacinth Robinson’s struggle, which with Patočka we might think of as Europe-the-idea. See Gasché, *Europe, or the Infinite Task: A Study of a Philosophical Concept*, Stanford UP, 2009, particularly pp. 211-36.

²⁸ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Oxford UP, 1972, p. 151. Hereafter, I abbreviate this volume *SA*.

²⁹ It is important to take stock of the fact that Trilling does cling excessively to a strict sense of psychological normativity here; he seems unwilling to entertain the possibility of any real variance in peoples’ neurologies that society may do better or worse at supporting. This is in addition to his limited interpretation of the Kinsey Report, as presented in *The Liberal Imagination*, wherein he interprets that report’s reflections on the variability and gradations of sexuality as they are really experienced by people reflect “a nearly conscious aversion from making intellectual distinctions.” See Trilling, “The Kinsey Report,” *TLI*, p. 241.

³⁰ In this sense, Trilling treads quite closely to Hannah Arendt’s interpretation of the French Revolution, which she understands as “determined by the exigencies of liberation not from tyranny but from necessity, and it was actuated by the limitless immensity of both the people’s misery and the pity this misery inspired.” Arendt sees the philosophical foundations of the French Revolution as the inspiration for the Russian. See Arendt, *On Revolution*, Penguin, 2006, p. 82.

³¹ Qtd. from John Keats, Trilling, “The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters,” *MOBI*, p. 246.

³² Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge UP, 1996, p. 165.

³³ Trilling, “Manners, Morals, and the Novel,” *TLI*, p. 206.

³⁴ My thinking on this point is indebted to the distinction between “actual presence,” the physical presence of a character within a story, and “narrative presence,” the degree of influence a character has on the progress of a story regardless of their actual presence, described in FatBrett, “Thor—The Broken God,” *Youtube*, 27 Jan 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gsx5QSe16rQ>.

³⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” trans. Richard Cohen, *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, Routledge, 1988, pp. 156-167.

³⁶ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, U of Chicago P, 1955, p. 55.

³⁷ A more thorough reading of this appearance of *Billy Budd* in Trilling’s novel can be found in Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Between Law and Justice: Legal Authority, Liberal Democracy, and Postwar Fiction, English Theses and Dissertations*, Brown Digital Repository, Brown University Library, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:733326/>, pp. 60-70.

³⁸ I am here invoking Roland Barthes’s concept of the “proairetic code,” the empirical sequence of actions that structure a text within a narrative, “what sustains, flows in a regular way, brings everything together” (29). It is the irreversibility of proairesis that I want to emphasize here—that, for Laskell, something wrong with his logic becomes fundamentally evident when he verbalizes it (this is not the same thing as the logic itself being faulty—the flaw is outside logic.) See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, 1974, pp. 19, 28-30.

³⁹ Trilling, *TLL*, p. xvii.

⁴⁰ I am leaving this word in quotation marks here and elsewhere because Trilling’s definition is distant enough from typical usage that it might cause confusion if not indicated.

⁴¹ Take, for instance, his own description of his memoir, five pages in: “That is why this terrible book is also a book of hope. For it is about the struggle of the human soul—of more than one human soul [...] But this tragedy will have been for nothing unless men understand it rightly, and from it the world takes hope and heart to begin its own tragic struggle with the evil that besets it from within and from without, unless it faces the fact that the world, the whole world, is sick unto death and that, among other things, this Case has turned a finger of fierce light into the suddenly opened and reeking body of our time.” See Chambers, *Witness*, Random House, 1952, p. 5.

⁴² A more neutral account of Chambers's role in the Hiss case than his own can be found in Sam Tanenhaus's biography, pp. 203-439. See Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography*, Random House, 1997.

⁴³ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, pp. 1859-1917, *William Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, Modern Library, 2007, p. 1907, Act V, sc. 1, ln. 37-38.

⁴⁴ Trilling, "What is Criticism?" *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965-75*, ed. Diana Trilling, Harcourt, 1979, p. 90.

CHAPTER 2: SELF-FASHIONING

¹ Ralph Ellison, "The Novel as a Function of American Democracy," *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan, Modern Library, 2003, p. 767. Hereafter, I abbreviate this volume *CERE*.

² Leon D. Trotsky, "Chapter 8: Revolutionary and Socialist Art," *Literature and Revolution* [1924], trans. Rose Strunsky, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2007, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch08.htm.

³ Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia*, Penguin, 2005, p. 258.

⁴ Stalin, "Speech at the First All-Union Conference of Stakhanovites," 17 November 1935, *Marxist Internet Archive*, 2008, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1935/11/17.htm>. For an extended historical explanation and discussion of Stakhanovism, see Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR*, Cambridge UP, 1988.

⁵ Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station: The American Artist and His Audience," *CERE*, 517.

⁶ Edmund Husserl, "The Vienna Lecture: Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity," *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr, Northwestern UP, 1970, p. 299.

⁷ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Vintage, 1980, pp. 457-58. Hereafter, I abbreviate this volume *IM*.

⁸ Lukács, "CRSR," p. 135.

⁹ Karl Radek, "Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art," August 1934, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2004, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/radek/>

1934/sovietwritercongress.htm. Radek was an ex-Trotskyist and a former member of the Left Opposition in the CPSU (Bolsheviks). In 1937, Radek was tried during the second Moscow Trial, the “Trial of the Seventeen,” for conspiracy under Article 58 of the RSFSR Penal Code. He was sentenced to ten years’ hard labor in a penal camp, where thereafter he was killed, supposedly in a fight with another inmate.

¹⁰ Marx, “Theses,” *MER*, p. 143. For an extended discussion of Marx’s understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, see Sigmund Krancberg, “The Unity of Theory and Practice in Historical Perspective,” *Studies in Soviet Thought*, vol. 41, no. 3, May 1991, pp. 173-205.

¹¹ Fadeev, qtd. in Vittorio Strada, “Socialist Realism,” *Dictionary of Twentieth Century Communism*, ed. Silvio Pons and Robert Service, trans. Mark Epstein and Charles Townsend, Princeton UP, 2010, p. 739. See also Maria Zalambani in “Literary Policies and Institutions,” *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, ed. Evgeny Dobrenko and Marina Balina, Cambridge UP, 2011, pp. 258-59.

¹² See, for instance, Dale Pesmen, *Russia and Soul: An Exploration*, Cornell UP, 2000.

¹³ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, U of Chicago P, 1981, p. 4. Clark’s list of “model novels” appears on pp. 261-63.

¹⁴ Clark, p. 162. For a full account of the “master plot,” particularly as it manifests in Aleksandr Fadeev’s novel *The Young Guard*, see pp. 159-188.

¹⁵ Arthur de Gobineau, qtd. in Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko, Vintage, 1961, p. 55. Hereafter, I abbreviate this volume *CM*.

¹⁶ “le marxisme [...] conçoit l’être humain et son essence comme le resultat d’un processus dans lequel l’individu concret, sensuel, actif, réfléchissant, es ten même temps objet et sujet, créateur et creature de soi-même.” Alfred Kurella, *Der Mensch als Schöpfer seiner selbst. Beiträge zum sozialistischen Humanismus* [1936], Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1958, p. 16, qtd. in Brigitte Studer, “L’Être perfectible: La formation du cadre stalinien par le ‘travail sur soi,’” *Genèses*, vol. 51, June 2003, p. 92. At the time he wrote this, Kurella was personal secretary to Georgi Dimitrov, the General Secretary of the Comintern. He would later go on to become the head of the cultural committee of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the SED [*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*], the Soviet-controlled governing party of postwar East Germany, where he led the implementation of Socialist Realism in East German culture. Translation from German to French Studer’s; translation from French to English my own.

¹⁷ Studer identifies the production of this sort of being—which she generally discusses in this article as the creation of “true Bolsheviks”—as the explicit central program of the numerous Leninist “schools” for foreign Communists established in

Russia by Stalin's government in the 1930s. Studer, "L'Être...", pp. 93, 102, 112, and passim.

¹⁸ "l'espèce humaine, affranchie de toutes ces chaînes, soustraite à l'empire du hasard, comme à celui des ennemis de ses progrès, et marchant d'un pas ferme et sûr dans la route de la vérité, de la vertu et du bonheur." Marquis de Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, Paris: Agasse, An III de la République [1794-95], p. 384.

¹⁹ "In fact, if work 'purified' even criminals and juvenile delinquents—following the plot of many socialist realist novels—what was at issue primarily was an interior form of work: work on oneself. It was necessary to get rid of one's old self, with its 'petty bourgeois individualist' dross and cultural backwardness, and make way for the new socialist self." Brigitte Studer, "New Man," *Dictionary of Twentieth Century Communism*, p. 581. See also Studer, "L'Être...", p. 94.

²⁰ Miłosz, *CM*, p. 71; Stalin, *Short Course*, pp. 252, 271-72.

²¹ Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," *CERE*, p. 181.

²² "Jug," p. 162; Ellison, interview with Robert Penn Warren, 25 Feb. 1964, Conversation 1, Tape 1, *Robert Penn Warren's Who Speaks for the Negro? An Archival Collection*, Vanderbilt U, 2012, <https://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/ralph-ellison> ("That's right – you're forgetting sacrifice...")

²³ For Matthiessen's elaboration of the idea of the "common reader," see "Method and Scope," *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, Oxford UP, 1941, pp. vii-xvi.

²⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Essays: First and Second Series*, ed. Joel Porte, Library of America, 2010, p. 49.

²⁵ Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Dissent*, vol. 10, no. 4, Autumn 1963, p. 354. Hereafter, I abbreviate this essay "BBNS."

²⁶ See Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African-American Literature?* Harvard UP, 2012, especially Chapter 1.

²⁷ In this sense, Ellison's arguments about (American) identity, especially those he proffers in opposition to Howe in this essay, form something of a proleptic critique of contemporary Afro-Pessimist ontology in literary studies and in Black studies.

²⁸ See, e.g., John Stauffer, "Frederick Douglass and the Aesthetics of Freedom," *Raritan*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2005, pp. 114-136.

²⁹ Barack H. Obama, "Address at the Dedication of the National Museum of African American History and Culture," 24 September 2016, qtd. in David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, Simon and Schuster, 2018, p. xiii.

³⁰ Ross Posnock, "Ralph Ellison, Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics," *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Ross Posnock, Cambridge UP, 2005, pp. 210-11.

³¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* [1949], Transaction, 1998, pp. xx-xxi.

³² One such early example can be found in J.T. Hansen, "A Holistic Approach to *Invisible Man*," *MELUS*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1979, p. 44, where Clifton is called a "disillusioned activist."

³³ Stalin, "Dialectical and Historical Materialism," p. 270.

³⁴ "Sambo Dolls' Maker Donates Toys," *Washington Post*, 9 Nov. 1988, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/sambo-dolls-maker-donates-toys/docview/307096726/se-2>.

³⁵ Shelly Jarenski, "Invisibility Embraced: The Abject as a Site of Agency in Ellison's *Invisible Man*," *MELUS*, vol. 35, no. 4, Winter 2010, p. 96.

³⁶ For two extremely influential examples, see Frantz Fanon's critique of Jean-Paul Sartre in "L'expérience vécue du Noir," *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Seuil, 1952, specifically pp. 106-09, and Roland Barthes, "La grande famille des hommes," *Mythologies*, Seuil, 1957, pp. 161-64, especially p. 163.

CHAPTER 3: LOVE FOR OTHERS

¹ Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton UP, 1997, pp. 243, 249: "He [Thomas Aquinas] too demanded that the virtuous citizen expose himself to the danger of death for the conservation of the commonweal, and he held that the virtue of *pietas*, often hardly distinguishable from *caritas*, was the power animating devotion and reverence to both parents and *patria*."

² Carl Schmitt, "State, Movement, People: The Triadic Structure of the Political Unity," in *State, Movement, People: The Triadic Structure of the Political Unity* (1933), with *The Question of Legality* (1950), ed. and trans. Simona Draghici, Plutarch, 2001, pp. 12-13.

³ Alexandra M. Kollontai, "Make way for Winged Eros: A Letter to Working Youth," trans. Alix Holt, Молодая Гвардия [Young Guard] no. 3, 1923, *Marxists*

Internet Archive, n.d., <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1923/winged-eros.htm>. All further citations of Kollontai refer to this text., and will not have in-line references.

⁴ J. Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy*, Penguin, 2008, p. 511. Though the primary interests of the capitalist “person” might, in a Communist interpretation, be seen as precluded from any anti-capitalist realization of the world, being a “capitalist” in the Communist view is not an immutable feature of one’s being as race was for the Nazis. This is why, for example, the idea of ideological “correction” (as in “Main Directorate of Correctional Labor Colonies” [Главное управление исправительно-трудовых колоний], one of the names of the Soviet gulag system, or the Chinese process of “Re-Education through Labor” or lao jiao [勞動教養]), was prevalent in Communist dictatorships, but never was in Nazi Germany.

⁵ Joseph V. Stalin, “Report on the Work of the Central Committee to the Eighteenth Congress of the C.P.S.U.(B.),” 10 March 1939, *Marxists Internet Archive*, 2008, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1939/03/10.htm>.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joan V. Scott and Judith C. Stark, U of Chicago P, 1996, p. 108 and passim.

⁷ See Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 24-25 and passim.

⁸ H. Kent Geiger, *The Family in Soviet Russia*, Harvard, 1968, p. 85.

⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, Hackett, 1997, pp. 485-86 [202b-203a].

¹⁰ As Arendt notes in the final pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, alienation and loneliness are among the key conditions that allowed totalitarian political beliefs to thrive in the twentieth century, and their exploitation are perhaps totalitarianism’s signal feature. See Arendt, “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [1951], Harvest, 1968, pp. 460-79, and in particular pp. 474-79: “What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century” (478).

¹¹ Bill Lyne, “God’s Black Revolutionary Mouth: James Baldwin’s Black Radicalism,” *Science and Society*, vol. 74, no. 1, January 2010, p. 27.

¹² Baldwin, “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind,” *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison, Library of America, 1998, p. 341. Hereafter, I abbreviate this essay “DC.”

¹³ Havel, "Powerless," pp. 35-36 and passim.

¹⁴ It is of course notable (but would take much longer to fully analyze than I can do here) that the Nation of Islam's historical philosophy focuses specifically on the "Black man" and on Black masculinity to the exclusion of women. The valorization of masculinity was an important philosophical component of Black separatist political movements of the time. For them, this was related to regaining dignity in the face of the perceived degradations imposed upon them by the white world. We, of course, do not need to look far to see the consequences of this way of thinking. I will simply point out that such a logic is at work when Eldridge Cleaver, one of the leaders of the Black Panther Party, excoriates Baldwin as "weak" in part due to his homosexuality, which he calls "a sickness, just as are baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors" (136). See Eldridge Cleaver, "Notes on a Native Son," *Soul on Ice*, Delta, 1968, pp. 122-137.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, "Theses," p. 145.

¹⁶ As Robert Scholes does in "The Illiberal Imagination."

¹⁷ On the phenomenon of incorruptible saints, the supposedly miraculous non-decomposition of the dead bodies of religious devotees, see Joan Carroll Cruz, *The Incorruptibles*, Rockwell, IL: Tan, 1977, pp. 27-42.

¹⁸ James Baldwin, *Another Country*, Vintage, 1962, p. 32. Hereafter, I abbreviate this volume *AC*.

¹⁹ In staging *Another Country* in this way, Baldwin's depiction of the possibility of human romantic interconnection violates at least eleven of Zalkind's 1924 "Twelve Commandments for Revolutionary Sex." See Zalkind, "Twelve Commandments of Revolutionary Sex" [1924], trans. James von Geldern, *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, <https://perma.cc/R2L4-W2UJ>.

²⁰ "Winged Eros."

²¹ See note 10 regarding "loneliness" in Arendt and its relationship to totalitarian domination.

²² Ellison, "As the Spirit Moves Mahalia" [1958], *CERE*, p. 250.

²³ "Le communisme, s'il dit que l'égalité est son fondement et qu'il n'y a pas de communauté tant que les besoins de tous les hommes ne sont pas *également* satisfaits (exigence en elle-même minime), suppose, non pas une société parfait, mais le principe d'une humanité transparente, produite essentiellement par elle seule, 'immanente.'" Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable*, Minuit, 1983, p. 11. Translation my own.

²⁴ “[...] lorsque cette communauté se dissout, donnant l’impression de n’avoir jamais pu être, même ayant été.” Blanchot, p. 88. Translation my own.

CHAPTER 4: THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PERCEIVE

¹ Susan Sontag, “The Art of Fiction, CXLIII,” interview by Edward Hirsch, *Paris Review*, vol. 37, no. 137, 1995, pp. 181.

² Sontag, contribution to “Tuesday, and After,” *New Yorker*, 24 September 2001, <https://perma.cc/NUU7-ZMDH>.

³ Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The History of a Movement*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Harvard UP, 2010, pp. 4-5.

⁴ For an example of the former, see Mark Gerson, *The Neoconservative Vision: From the Cold War to the Culture Wars*, Madison Books, 1996, or Jacob Heilbrunn, *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons*, Doubleday, 2008. For an example of the latter, see Vaïsse.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy*, Yale UP, 2006, p. 16.

⁶ Lukács, “CRSR,” p. 117; Nikita Khrushchev, “Speech to the 20th Congress of the CPSU,” 24-25 February 1956, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm>.

⁷ Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *National Interest*, Summer 1989, pp. 4-5; Kołakowski, p. 929.

⁸ Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992, pp. 71, 131.

⁹ Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire,” *MER*, p. 595.

¹⁰ Sontag, “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” *Essays of the 1960s and 70s*, ed. David Rieff, Library of America, 2013, pp. 284-85. Hereafter, I abbreviate this volume *Essays*, and this essay “OC.”

¹¹ Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, Fordham UP, 2017, p. 11 and passim; Peter Lilja, “Defending a Common World: Hannah Arendt on the State, the Nation and Political Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, vol. 37, no. 6, November 2018, pp. 537-52.

¹² Benjamin Moser, *Sontag: Her Life and Work*, HarperCollins, 2019, pp. 433, 437.

¹³ Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, 2nd ed., ed. Henry Hardy, Princeton UP, 2013, p. 11.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Introduction into Politics," trans. John E. Woods, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn, Schocken, 2005, pp. 175-76.

¹⁵ Adrian Parr, *The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics*, Columbia UP, 2013.

¹⁶ Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil*, U of Chicago P, 2017, p. 2.

¹⁷ Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," *Essays*, p. 330.

¹⁸ In this way she parallels both Ellison and Baldwin: for Ellison, the construction of a personality is a work of art; for Baldwin, the intimate relation with another person is a form of liberation.

¹⁹ Sontag, "Against Interpretation," *Essays*, p. 12. Hereafter, I abbreviate this essay "AI."

²⁰ The language of intentionality from subject to object used here is Husserl's. For his elaboration of the concept, see Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, volume 2, ed. Dermot Moran, trans. J.N. Findlay, Routledge, 2001, pp. 94-127.

²¹ Sontag's rejection of classification clarifies why her method should not be identified with Heather Love's call for a reframing of "reading as a social science, one that along with more traditional social scientific methods can contribute to the project of showing 'what the real world is really like.'" For Sontag, human beings can never attain a complete image or understanding of reality, of "what the real world is really like." That "real world," however, binds them nonetheless, and they are obligated to *attempt to* understand it in the course of life in the world, especially life lived with others, as I discuss below. The act, not the image, is the key object of merit. Heather Love, "Close Reading and Thin Description," *Public Culture*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2013, p. 430.

²² Sontag, "Thirty Years Later," *Later Essays*, ed. David Rieff, Library of America, 2017, p. 467. Hereafter, I abbreviate this volume *LE*.

²³ Sontag, "OC," *Essays*, pp. 284-85.

²⁴ Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," *Essays*, p. 298.

²⁵ Martin Jay, "'The Aesthetic Ideology' as Ideology; or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?" *Cultural Critique*, vol. 21, Spring 1992, pp. 41-43.

²⁶ Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," *LE*, p. 70.

²⁷ Sontag, "Godard," *Essays*, p. 414.

²⁸ Sontag, "Theatre and Film," *Essays*, p. 391.

²⁹ Sontag, *On Photography, Essays*, p. 529. Hereafter, I abbreviate this text *OP*.

³⁰ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others, LE*, p. 608. Hereafter, I abbreviate this text *RPO*.

³¹ Of course, as Frederic Jameson famously argued, there is nothing inherently Left leaning about these sorts of positions. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke UP, 1992.

³² By "modern liberal consciousness," Sontag is referring to consumption culture: "Whatever the moral claims made on behalf of photography, its main effect is to convert the world into a department store or museum-without-walls in which every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption, promoted into an item for aesthetic appreciation. Through the camera people have become consumers or tourists of reality—*Réalités*, as the name of the French photo magazine suggests, for reality is understood as plural, fascinating, and up for grabs. Bringing the exotic near, rendering the familiar and homely exotic, photographs make the entire world available as an object of appraisal" (*OP*, 606). Her main critique is that photography takes away the substantiality of reality and, therefore, the world, in the same way that Trilling argues that Marxism's moral asceticism degrades our appreciation of the humanity developed in moments of moral ambiguity—a key feature of liberalism as this book understands it.

³³ For example, per Jean-Luc Nancy, "Sarajevo has become the name for a complete system of reduction to identity [...] it is no longer a place to visit, to conduct business or a liaison [...] it is a dimensionless point on a diagram of sovereignty" (277). See also Nancy's discussion of the "systematic rape of Bosnian women" (285-86), which he interprets as a paradoxical "relation of which it is also the negation." Nancy, "In Praise of the Melee: For Sarajevo, March 1993," trans. Steven Miller, *A Finite Thinking*, Stanford UP, 2003, pp. 277-288.

³⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago UP, 1958, pp. 207-08.

³⁵ For example, the existential character of the distinction between "proletariat" and "bourgeoisie" articulated in Stalin, "Report on the Work of the Central Committee to the Eighteenth Congress of the C.P.S.U.(B)."

³⁶ George W. Bush, “Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, September 20, 2001,” *Selected Speeches of George W. Bush, 2001-2008*, <https://perma.cc/YGG9-QQUR>, p. 68. Hereafter, I abbreviate this speech “JS.”

³⁷ Stanley Fish, “Condemnation without Absolutes,” *New York Times*, 15 October 2001.

³⁸ Schmitt, pp. 12-13, 15.

³⁹ The political theorist Sheldon Wolin makes an argument to this effect in *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, 2nd ed., Princeton UP, 2004, pp. 592-594, and in *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, 2nd ed., Princeton UP, 2017, pp. 41-68.

⁴⁰ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind, I: Thinking*, ed. Mary McCarthy, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, p. 59.

⁴¹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind, II: Willing*, ed. Mary McCarthy, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, p. 196.

⁴² Anna Kornbluh, “We Have Never Been Critical: Toward the Novel as Critique,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2017, p. 401.

⁴³ Christopher Castiglia, *The Practices of Hope: Literary Criticism in Disenchanted Times*, NYU P, 2017, pp. 3, 11.

⁴⁴ Fadeev, qtd. in Strada, p. 739.

⁴⁵ Svetlana Alexievich, *In Search of the Free Individual: The History of the Russian-Soviet Soul*, trans. Jamey Gambrell, Cornell UP, 2018, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Alexievich, pp. 17-18.

CONCLUSION

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990, p. 262.

² Marci Shore, *The Taste of Ashes: The Afterlife of Totalitarianism in Eastern Europe*, Broadway, 2013, p. 15.

³ Havel, “Joint Session.”

⁴ Paul Wilson, introduction to *Letters to Olga: June 1979-September 1982*, by Václav Havel, trans. Paul Wilson, Knopf, 1988, p. 3; and Joseph Yanosik, “The Plastic People of the Universe,” *Perfect Sound Forever*, March 1996, <https://perma.cc/W799-L653>.

⁵ Shore, *ibid.*

⁶ Blanchot, p. 11.

⁷ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Stuart Woolf, Touchstone, 1996, p. 121.

⁸ Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. Robert Chandler, New York Review Books, 1985, p. 683. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas was fond of discussing this moment from the novel as an example of “welcoming the face” as the encounter with the other, as in “In the Name of the Other,” *Is It Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins, Stanford UP, 2001, pp. 191-92. A full discussion of Levinas’s treatment of this novel across his body of work can be found in Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Companion to Emmanuel Levinas*, Cambridge UP, 2011, pp. 16-28.

⁹ Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta*, DC Comics, 1990, pp. 159-60.

¹⁰ Moore and Lloyd, pp. 170-71.

¹¹ Havel, “Powerless,” p. 96.

¹² This is what the Ukrainian political philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko argues when, in an April 2022 interview discussing the then-recently-begun invasion of Ukraine by the Russian military, he says that “this is [a] very important feeling, when you face the loss, when you face something that you lose, when you understand that something will disappear, can disappear. Your life can disappear. The life of your children can disappear. Your house can disappear. Your freedom can disappear, you know. And this is what makes you strong. This kind of facing up with mortality, facing the mortality of humans.” Yermolenko insists throughout this interview that Ukraine’s nationhood is defined by “values of freedom.” If he is right, the plight of Ukraine in the (as of this writing) ongoing invasion is another instance of the philosophical conflict this book explores. Yermolenko, “A Ukrainian Philosopher on What Putin Never Understood about Ukraine,” interview with Ezra Klein, *New York Times*, 12 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/12/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-volodymyr-ermolenko.html>.

¹³ Hidetaka Miyazaki, “The End of Fire,” *Dark Souls III*, FromSoftware, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWRgKolp7LQ>.

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