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Between Times:
21st Century American Fiction
and the Long Sixties

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis examines conceptions of time and history in five American novels published between 1995 and 2012 which take as their subject matter events associated with the counterculture and New Left of the 1960s and 1970s.

The thesis is organized around close readings of five novels. The first chapter focuses on Jennifer Egan's *The Invisible Circus* (1995) and argues that it incorporates a number of problematic temporal experiences which have the effect of establishing a key tension of all the novels considered here: the concern with contextualizing and historicizing particular events and cultural atmospheres while remaining faithful to utopian ideas of radical change. Chapter two argues that Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document* (2006) is oriented both structurally and thematically towards a future in which the relationship between the 1960s and 1990s will more clearly be understandable. The third chapter examines the way Christopher Sorrentino's *Trance* (2005) explores the multiplicitous nature of historical narratives, and how he distinguishes between those narratives and a conception of the bare events beneath them. The focus of chapter four is Lauren Groff's *Arcadia* (2012) and examines how conceptions of the relationship between humans and nature influence theories of time, mythic histories and post-apocalyptic narratives. The final chapter on David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011) argues that the tension between continuation and change found in the conversion narrative is partly reconciled by a conception of time that allows the moment of radical utopian change (the moment of conversion) to be one of re-entrance into history.

At stake throughout is the way these novels' interpretation of particular events and larger cultural tendencies reveals and makes manifest various processes of historicization. I maintain a dual focus on the way these novels present historicization as something undertaken by individuals and societies and the ways in which these novels themselves not only engage in historicizations of the period but are in various ways self-conscious about doing so. If contemporary scholarship on the emergence of what has been called post-postmodern literature (Stephen J. Burn, Andrew Hoberek, Adam Kelly, Caren Irr) identifies a return to temporal concerns in recent fiction, the readings that comprise my thesis also make use of conceptions of time and history by Mark Currie, Jacques Derrida, Reinhold Niebuhr, Norman Mailer, Christopher Lasch, and Robert N. Bellah (among others) in order to ask: what are the particular material contours of the experiences of time and history manifested in these recent examples of the 'sixties novel'?

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List of Abbreviations

- ETD* Dana Spiotta *Eat the Document* (New York: Scribner, 2006)
- TPK* David Foster Wallace *The Pale King* (New York, Boston, London: Little, Brown and Company, 2011)
- SN* Stephen Paul Miller *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1999)

Introduction: Between Times

In his book *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, Stephen J. Burn suggests that one of the characteristics of recent American fiction is a return – after postmodernism’s spatial emphasis – to questions of history and temporal experience. Uneasily using the term “post-postmodern” to distinguish this emerging sensibility, Burn notes that “[w]here the emphasis on character seems to differ between postmodern and post-postmodern fiction ... is in the degree of personal history dramatized by the author, and this is linked to alternative treatments of time” (2008, 24). In postmodern novels, explains Burn, there is often very little character backstory, and it appears only when something happens in the narrative that can only be made sense of through reference to a character’s history. Time, in the postmodern novel, is a kind of last resort. By contrast, in the works of writers Burn calls post-postmodern, characters’ personal histories are fuller because writers are happier to analeptically interrupt the passage of time in their narratives to explain things that have happened in the past and how they relate to and influence the present. For Burn, “[t]his shift ... represents a younger generation’s more fundamental belief in the shaping influence of temporal process – that the things that happen to you in the past make a difference to who you are in the present” (2008, 25). Crucially, if these younger writers exhibit a greater confidence in relating and linking the past, the present, and the future, they also feel more able to assert that meaning can be made of those linkages.

Peter Boxall, in *Twenty-First Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*, has written of a “new commitment to the materiality of history” (12) in contemporary fiction, and while his book focuses mainly on the British and Commonwealth novel we can detect something similar in recent American fiction. The novels considered in this thesis – by Jennifer Egan, Dana Spiotta, Christopher Sorrentino, Lauren Groff, and David Foster Wallace – are all, in varying ways, examples of writing trying to get to grips with the almost tactile reality of history, yet at the same time they place in question quite what we mean when we talk about materiality. In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett asks

How did Marx’s notion of materiality – as economic structures and exchanges that provoke many other events – come to stand for the materialist perspective per se? Why is there not a more robust debate between contending philosophies of materiality? (xvi)

Bennett asks this in the service of a posthumanist project that seeks to dissolve – or at least destabilize – traditional humanist binaries between human and animal, animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic, and her troubling of the Marxist notion of materiality as equalling economic conditions and structures aims to help articulate a “vital materiality” (vii) comprised of organic and inorganic matter as well as abstract concepts. The writers considered in this thesis ask a similar question, though with less articulated aims and less radical conclusions, remaining in the human realm. The problems and insufficiencies that they find in conceptions of materiality stem from their understanding of their role as explorers and explicators of consciousness; these writers are interested in the materiality of phenomenological experience as much as the materiality of objective historical conditions. In other words, they seek to examine how history is made to feel material in subjective experiences of time, and acknowledge that time undergirds all experience. Taking my cue from this, this thesis will use the terms time and history in broad terms but also to refer to complementary-yet-distinct parts of temporal experience. So if time is meant to point more to personal, individual or subjective experiences of time, history identifies more the necessarily collective event – large or small – and the attempt to link individual events and people together into a narrative. The phrase “temporal experience” is intended to foreground this thesis’ attempt to discuss the relationship between the individual and history, and the narratives that are constructed in the interstices between them. These writers ask, in various ways, what is the “stuff” of history? How can it be grasped?

With this new interest comes a lot of problems. As Adam Kelly has noted, although these writers can in many ways be considered qualitatively different from their postmodern predecessors, the latter’s influence can still be identified. In his essay “Beginning with Postmodernism,” Kelly theorizes and periodizes this in generational terms, defining a group of writers born between the late 1950s and early 1970s as “post-boomer[s]” (2011, 393) who respond quite explicitly to postmodern fiction’s characteristics and preoccupations. As we shall see, this thesis finds useful Kelly’s way of distinguishing these younger writers from the postmodern generation of Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, John Barth et al., but also includes a chapter on a novel – Lauren Groff’s *Arcadia* – written by someone born a little after this generation in 1978. In literary terms, at least, this seems to place Groff in the generation succeeding the post-boomers, those like Egan, Spiotta, Sorrentino and Wallace who were all born in the early-to-mid 1960s (Egan and Wallace in 1962, Sorrentino in 1963, Spiotta in 1966) and who are now achieving the kind of mid-

career recognition writers of Groff's generation will not see for another ten years or so.¹ Groff belongs to the generation marked by *Granta*'s Best of Young American Novelists list from 2007, all of whom were born between 1971 and 1982. The previous version, compiled in 1996, encapsulates the literary culture of the mid-1990s, when the post-boomers were publishing early and important works: Egan's *The Invisible Circus*, the focus of chapter one, was published in 1995, as was Sorrentino's *Sound on Sound*, while Wallace's *Infinite Jest* was published in 1996. Spiotta's *Lightning Field* was published in 2001. On this earlier list one finds Jeffrey Eugenides, Jonathan Franzen, and Lorrie Moore, all of whom knew at least Wallace in a personal capacity, the first two featuring him in barely-disguised form in recent novels.²

Nevertheless, if Kelly notes of the post-boomers that "in publishing their early work in the late-1980s and 1990s, they begin by developing a conversation with postmodern fiction" (2011, 394), more important in my view is the sense that the social, cultural and perhaps even political dynamics which helped give birth to postmodern fiction are to a certain extent still present, or at least residually operational. As Kelly acknowledges, beginning with postmodernism "for younger writers [also] means inheriting the heavily mediated information society that the earlier generation of American writers had tracked in its emergent phase" (2011, 395). Here we come across a key distinction: while postmodern fiction may have lost some of its urgency and dominance (if, that is, it ever possessed it to the degree often assumed³), we are still very much dealing with the effects of postmodernity, even as the various crises of the 2000s seem to be moulding a new cultural and political mode. This is important for our purposes because it bequeaths a number of residual "anxieties" (2011, 395), the most important being a "disconnection from historical time associated with the postmodern spatial turn" (2011, 395). If these writers begin with theory as an established part of readers' engagement with fiction (2011, 396), the fact that such theory "was initially felt to offer continuity with the spirit of 1960s radical politics

¹ Wallace was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2012 for *The Pale King*, Egan won it in 2011 for *A Visit From the Goon Squad* along with the National Book Critics Circle Award, and was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. Spiotta's *Eat the Document* was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction in 2006, as was Sorrentino's *Trance* in 2005. His novel was also long-listed for the 2007 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

² Eugenides through Leonard in *The Marriage Plot* (2011) and Franzen, perhaps more obliquely, through Richard Katz in *Freedom* (2010).

³ Andrew Hoberek has noted that "[e]ven at its high point, however, postmodernism – and in particular the form of postmodernism defined around self-conscious literary experimentalism – was not the only or even always the dominant player on the literary field" and follows Wendy Steiner in suggesting that the so-called postmodern period is "in fact best understood not as purely postmodern but as characterized by the coexistence and frequent commingling of high postmodernist experimentalism, traditional realism, and an autobiographical strain related to both women's writing and the memoir" (236).

and counterculture” (2011, 397) is important in the context of this thesis’ interest in that decade and in view of the ambivalence these writers exhibit toward Marxist conceptions of materiality and history – one of the more dominant theoretical viewpoints of the 1960s. Ultimately, for Kelly – and for this thesis this is his most important point – “beginning with postmodernism means beginning with history as a problem” (2011, 393). If there is one thing that unites the writers considered in this thesis, it is an understanding that history, for all their renewed interest in its workings and in time’s materiality, presents a problem. While literary postmodernism as a cultural tendency may, in Andrew Hoberek’s words, be “waning” (233), these writers have not shaken it entirely, and they still find useful some of the attitudes manifested in it towards postmodernity (understood as Jean-François Lyotard’s “condition” [1984, xxiii]), particularly its “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). For these writers, if history is material, then it is also multiple. They recognize, as Bennett notes, that further problems come from the interaction between this interest in material history and the limits of conceptions of causality: “[i]f one extends the time frame of the action beyond that of even an instant, billiard-ball causality falters ... causality is more emergent than efficient, more fractal than linear” (33). Following Hannah Arendt’s writing about the impossibility of anticipating totalitarianism, Bennett writes that “sources [of historical events] are necessarily multiple, made up of elements unaffiliated before the “crystallization” process began. In fact, what makes the event happen is precisely the contingent coming together of a set of elements” (34).

This thesis, then, will examine how these attitudes towards time and history manifest themselves in five novels from the last twenty years: Jennifer Egan’s *The Invisible Circus* (1995), Dana Spiotta’s *Eat the Document* (2006), Christopher Sorrentino’s *Trance* (2005), Lauren Groff’s *Arcadia* (2012), and David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King* (2011). In so doing, I give a novel like *Arcadia* the academic attention it has, to my knowledge, not yet received, and bring to greater attention those like *The Invisible Circus* and *Trance* which have received in my view not enough. Of those that have received more – *The Pale King* and, to a lesser extent, *Eat the Document* – I hope to provide new and stimulating readings. If my title speaks of twenty-first century fiction, I include Egan’s first novel because it seems to me to clearly set the tone for the investigations into the legacies of the sixties that follow in the other four novels considered here. All of them deal in various ways with the events associated with the counterculture and the New Left of the sixties and seventies, mainly with events between the mid-to-late 1960s and 1975. As such they are part of a growth in fiction since the mid-1990s dealing with this period of American history. Some

of this has been written by authors born before the sixties⁴ but in this thesis I will be concerned with that written by novelists either too young to take part in the events of the period or born after them. If I am keen to investigate the particularities of Burn's general statement through a selection of close readings of post-postmodern novels, this mini-genre of the sixties novel offers a particularly rich textual node in which to investigate conceptions of time and history, not least because of the intersection of their thematic concerns ('the sixties') and their literary choices (their 'post-postmodern-ness').

One reason for this is that if questions of time and history are paramount here, they are more acutely so than in other forms of contemporary fiction. While the historical novel is a fixture in the literary landscape, these novels stand out because they are concerned with a period that was itself highly aware of conceptions and theorizations of time, history, and temporal experience, in particular the relationship between individual, personal experiences of time and larger historical forces. This self-awareness or self-reflexivity will be one of the constant threads of this thesis, and will be considered alongside the way the period represents for these writers one of great ruptures and irruptions in and of history,⁵ a period when concepts of continuance and tradition were confronted with powerful beliefs in utopian newness. The novelists considered here for the most part understand the period as in various ways different from what came before and what came after, but also that its disruptions and reverberations continue to be felt – and still need to be examined – today. If they recognize these irruptions, they also note that they seem to have had irreversible effects while the political faith that sustained them simultaneously dwindled into disappointment. Part of the need for continued examination of the period's legacy comes precisely from the lack of clarity regarding it. For these writers, what we inherit from the sixties is both incomplete or nearly intangible and still vivid and pulsing. One of the results of this is the difficulty these writers experience in reconciling two impulses: one that pays adequate attention to the character of these irruptions in and of themselves (which includes the possibility of admitting and accepting the limited ability of writers like themselves to name or identify them); and one which hopes – and aims to show – that an understanding of the period might be possible by placing those irruptions into some kind of context, even

⁴ Phillip Roth *American Pastoral* (1997), Neil Gordon *The Company You Keep* (2003), T.C. Boyle *Drop City* (2003), Russell Banks *The Darling* (2004), Joyce Carol Oates *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006), Denis Johnson *Tree of Smoke* (2007), Sigrid Nunez *The Last of Her Kind* (2007), Cathleen Schine *Fin and Lady* (2013).

⁵ This double sense should be understood as both a rupture in the passing of history of which we are daily and unthinkingly aware, and irruptions of something that seems to claim a greater and more properly historical nature. See chapter 5 for a discussion of this in terms of Jean-François Lyotard's conception of the differences between the new and the now.

while acknowledging that such an undertaking threatens the coherence of the concept of irruption itself. Caren Irr, in her book *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*, notes something similar in what she calls “the twenty-first-century novel of revolution,” which “displaces the [novel] form’s conventional confidence in progress with amazement at the fact of radical ruptures, even when it reveals the ill effects and brevity of that change” (149). Here, my focus will emphasize novelistic narratives of history, although at points it will be difficult to ignore the importance of the novel form.

Irr’s observation reminds us that in this context narrative becomes hugely important, and these novels are all concerned with how it can both interrogate and understand events and processes. But they are also interested in how the very issue of constructing historical narratives is itself put into doubt by the events of the period. As Don DeLillo, an important influence on these writers and whose novel *Libra* (1988) falls somewhere between Phillip Roth’s generation’s view of the period and the younger writers’, put it in a 1991 episode of the BBC’s documentary series *Omnibus*:

When Kennedy was shot, something changed forever in America, something opened up, a sense of randomness, deep ambiguity. We lost the narrative thread ... The assassination left an emptiness that made everything plausible, made us susceptible to the most incredible ideas and fantasies. We couldn’t seem to find out what happened on even the most basic level ... There was no coherent reality we could analyse and study (*Omnibus*)⁶

The novels considered here recognize this narrative difficulty, and understand it as extending to the task of periodizing the sixties. The parts of *The Pale King* that are the focus of my fifth chapter, for instance, are set in the mid-to-late 1970s and 1980s, and characters lament the society of the immediate post-war period as well as the very early years of American independence; its – and my – interest in the sixties comes in the way it uses the period as a focus for retrospection and as a hinge between different conceptions of utopia, citizenship and the individual’s relationship to the state. Similarly, *Arcadia* is structured around four sections, set respectively in 1973, 1982, 2008 and 2018. *Eat the Document* is as concerned with 1999 and 2000 as it is the late sixties and early seventies, while *The Invisible Circus*’s present is 1978, though its key event occurred in 1970. *Trance*

⁶ Nearer the time, Joan Didion wrote in *The White Album* that in the 1960s she “began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself” (11).

is the only novel here that is set exclusively within the period, although that is itself open to debate.⁷ In recognition of this, this thesis' use of the phrase "the sixties" will be shadowed and informed by another, "the long sixties," a phrase – though not the accompanying periodizations – it borrows from Marianne DeKoven's *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (3 – her periodization is 1957 to 1973), Mark McGurl's *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (1960 to 1975), and Tom Hayden's *The Long Sixties: From 1960 to Barack Obama*.⁸ The phrase is useful because it gets us away from "the sixties" as the simplified media idea of the counterculture and hippies and helps us keep our attention on the real political, social and historical upheavals of the period. DeKoven's use of it is interesting because her periodization – "extending from the late fifties to the early seventies" (3) – is that of Kelly's post-boomers – "a generation I take to be born roughly between the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1970s" (2011, 392). However, given the breadth of history just detailed and the concerns that we will find in the novels, Hayden's title – though less his faithfully optimistic tone – is the one that most speaks to the interests of this thesis, namely the continued presence of the sixties in our cultural and political imaginary, and the ways we try to account for that presence.⁹ Indeed the primary interest of this thesis is how these novelists view the period, rather than the period itself; in conceptions of, ideas about and

⁷ Andreas Killen, for instance, has suggested that the first action by the Symbionese Liberation Army (the group at the centre of Sorrentino's novel) in 1973 marked not "a continuation of the insurrectionary impulses of the sixties" but the "tragic dead end of that decade's contestations" (3). In my view, it is hard to temporally separate those two statements, just as it is difficult to view the SLA outside the context of the 1960s.

⁸ In describing the growth of creative writing in the postwar period, McGurl "divide[s] the chapters of [his] book into three roughly chronological parts," the second of which he describes – in relation to creative writing's institutionalization – as "the pivotal and famously "expressive" period of the long 1960s, when the program really began to multiply" (28). The book's contents page provides confirmation of the periodization. Hayden notes that "the term ... has floated into academic discourse in the past decade [1999-2009], its origins obscure" (3) before offering a genealogy in an endnote, one worth quoting here: "The phrase may have risen in collective conversation among scholars looking back. One source might have been the late Arthur Marwick, who employed the phrase to refer to 1958-1974 in his book *The Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). There is no book titled "The Long Sixties" [until Hayden's own, that is]. Mark Hamilton Lytle's *America's Uncivil Wars: From Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) covers the extended time period. The phrase appears as the subtitle in Mim Scala's *Diary of a Teddy Boy: A Memoir of the Long Sixties* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2001), and also as the title of a proposed curriculum on gay/lesbian/transgender studies by Ian Lekus, in *Organization of American Historians' Magazine of History* 20, no. 2 (March 2006): 32-28" (243). The phrase is common in non-American accounts of the period, too. See: Caroline Hoefferle's *British Student Activism in the Long Sixties* (New York: Routledge, 2013), Jaime M. Pensado's *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), and Blake Slonecker's *A New Dawn for the New Left: Liberation News Service, Montague Farm, and the Long Sixties* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁹ Though it should be pointed out that Hayden approaches the period from a very different perspective to the novelists considered here. His aim, as a central participant in the events he recounts, is to "battle amnesia with remembrance" (v). This thesis will show how for these five novelists, thinking about the period is a different process altogether.

attitudes toward the period as much as depictions or representations of the events themselves. In short, its main focus of interest is in processes of historicization. As such, extending Hayden's description of "The First Sixties, 1955-1965" (1), "The Second Sixties, 1965-1975" (57) and "The Sixties at Fifty" (93), we might talk of a variety of simultaneous long sixties – ones which, like DeKoven, McGurl, and Hayden speak to a bounded set of cultural, political and social events, but also ones which refer more to the afterlives of these events. If this thesis actually uses the phrase "the sixties" more than "the long sixties," this is intended to signal an *unintended* effect of writing about the way the period is still important today: dealing with events, groups, and people associated with it, which may extend temporally beyond even the periodizations of "the long sixties," one is always also dealing with pre-existing narratives of those events, groups, and people as "the sixties." In this sense I conceive of the phrases as acting in accord with the "between" of my title, a word that is also intended to point toward a number of characteristics these novels all share.

Firstly, "Between Times" acknowledges the simple fact that these novels were not published at the time of the events they depict but between twenty-five and fifty years after them. (Any conception of being in between requires two bracketing points, even if, as we shall see here, one is anticipated rather than present and the other is flexible and multiple). Yet if the "Between" refers to "between then and now," it also speaks of "being in-between" and types of what we might call temporary or intermediate historicization. Thus we see in *The Invisible Circus* the creation of historical accounts of events that are ongoing, in *Eat the Document* the conception of the future as a time in which fuller narratives will be available, in *Trance* the constant verification of historical importance through the news media, in *Arcadia* the construction of myths by a commune about itself, and in *The Pale King* attempts to account for political events of the early 1980s by narratives of the 1960s.

If "Between" also hints at a multiplicity of narratives and temporal experiences, it refers too to one of the reasons for them, namely the ambivalence about the New Left and the counterculture exhibited by these novels, one which laments and even idolizes its confident radicalism but finds itself unable to 'turn off' its (surely influenced by Lyotard and others¹⁰) critique of that radicalism's historical arrogance, even when it recognizes that such confidence is needed – as a sort of necessary crudeness or useful stupidity, what Theodor

¹⁰ For an account of the influence of theory on the contemporary novel, particularly some of the novelists considered in this thesis, see Nicholas Dames' "The Theory Generation," written for *n+1* magazine.

Adorno describes in *Negative Dialectics* as “clowning”¹¹ – for the formation of utopian thinking. In my first chapter, I find a particularly clear example of this ambivalence in the character of Wolf, a former New Leftist who from the temporal vantage point of 1978 sees the Left’s failure as rooted in this extravagant confidence in historical mastery. When reading *The Invisible Circus*, I find it useful to consider the ideas Reinhold Niebuhr described in his 1952 book *The Irony of American History*, ideas which to a certain extent inform the rest of the thesis and which connect these novelists’ consideration of specific historical periods with larger narratives of American history. While Niebuhr advocated a position between the extremities of liberal American and Soviet Russian historical confidence which accepts that one cannot control the entirety of history but also avoids a crippling relativism, if these writers say anything about the events of the sixties it is that parts of them are valuable and useful (particularly political faith) while other parts need to be critiqued, should be dispensed with or were mistakes (often forms of arrogance).¹² “Between,” then, also evokes a moderating position seen in these novels’ rejections of the extreme violent behaviour of the Red Army Faction (*The Invisible Circus*), the moral quagmires experienced – and created – by the Weathermen (*Eat the Document*), the delusions of self-importance that led the SLA to assert their leadership of a revolution (*Trance*), and the attempt to institute new modes of temporality based on political beliefs (*Arcadia*). This moderating intent finds literary manifestation in Wallace’s staging of a tension between the moment-by-moment accounting for Chris Fogle’s conversion and the desire not to dilute its radicalism and power, something also present in *The Invisible Circus*, in which Wolf and Phoebe both discover the need to attempt some reconciliation between the dreams of the counterculture and the late-’70s reality, however temporary and insufficient. These sorts of tensions are in some ways a re-evaluation of the “both/and” (166) structure which Linda Hutcheon found in postmodernism. While postmodernism sought to embrace contradiction with this mechanism, the writers considered here revisit contradictions only to point to the problems that come from both attempting to remain

¹¹ For Adorno, “the un-naive thinker knows how far he remains from the object of his thinking, and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely” (14).

¹² The story of Niebuhr’s role in American culture is itself instructive for our purposes – a writer of the Cold War, he has been rediscovered in the early twenty-first century by moderate, centrist politicians like Hilary Clinton, John McCain, and Barack Obama, all politicians marked personally and politically by their roles and actions in the 1960s. Indeed Obama is quoted on the 2008 reissue of *The Irony of American History* as describing Niebuhr as “one of my favorite philosophers.” In *The Long Sixties*, Tom Hayden quotes Obama saying “I’ve always felt a curious relationship to the sixties. In a sense, I’m a pure product of that era” (2). Hayden also notes that McCain was “a navy pilot who bombed North Vietnam two dozen times before being shot down and imprisoned in Hanoi,” Clinton “shared the values of the 1962 Port Huron Statement” and Obama “was accused during the [2008 Presidential] campaign of “palling” with a former Weathermen founder” (3).

faithful to incompatible, duelling conceptions of reality, narrative, time and history, and those that come from collapsing those contradictions and paradoxes in the renewed assertive hope of certainty. Lauren Groff ends *Arcadia*, for instance, by actively and self-consciously introducing a temporal compromise understood also as a political one: in the face of the disappointment of failed utopias, though not wanting to give up on the category altogether, one can only live in the moment.

One aspect of this – and a final resonance of “Between” – is the deferral involved in hoping that greater understanding will come in the future. This is the third characteristic of these novels. In his book *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s*, Samuel Cohen describes Peter Brooks’s concept of the “anticipation of retrospection” as the state of “looking forward to looking back” (201). These novels are littered with instances of this anticipation, both formally and at the level of character, and it seems to signal a hope that there will be a time in the future when the story will be completed, when an overall, concrete or fully understandable historical meaning will be available. This is most clearly seen in *Eat the Document*, which is, I argue, structured around – is between – bookending expressions of the desire for future completion. In this sense, then, our present is “between” the events that withhold comprehension and the time in which they will submit to meaning and understanding. These writers, their characters, and we as readers are also situated “between” ignorance and knowledge.

The Problems of History:
Jennifer Egan's *The Invisible Circus*

In the growing body of scholarship exploring what is currently and provisionally known as the post-postmodern novel, the question of history features prominently. As I mentioned in my introduction, Stephen J. Burn has suggested that post-postmodern novels are distinguished by a more solid faith than their postmodern predecessors in personal history and what he calls “the shaping influence of the temporal process.” Describing works by Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace and Richard Powers, Burn notes how these authors devote significant portions of *The Corrections* (2001), *Infinite Jest* (1996) and *Gain* (1998) respectively to character backstories and explaining how these histories form the personal context for their current behaviour and appearance. One could add Jennifer Egan's *The Invisible Circus* (1995) to that list. The novel, set in 1978, dramatizes the inheritance eighteen year-old Phoebe O'Connor receives from her older sister Faith, who died when Phoebe was ten. What is particularly striking about the novel is that while Phoebe is obsessed with Faith and the meaning of her life, she attributes her sister's vitality to her involvement with the counterculture of the 1960s. Thus coming to terms with the personal and familial fact of Faith's death also means understanding the inheritance Phoebe's own generation, too young to fully take part in the events of the sixties, receive from the counterculture. In this way, Phoebe can be considered one of what Adam Kelly has called “a range of individuals from ... post-boomer novels who find themselves confronting the spectral forces of history” (2011, 414). Kelly suggests that in the work of writers like Powers, Franzen, and Wallace, as well as Colson Whitehead and Jennifer Egan, on whose 2001 novel *Look at Me* his essay focuses, the depiction of a recognizably postmodern world is infused with a “renewed historical focus” (2011, 393) after the spatial emphases of postmodernism. Like Burn, Kelly sees this renewal of interest in history as a characteristic of a developing “post-postmodern aesthetics” (2011, 392). Nevertheless, while in Egan's work such a revival recalls the modernist fascination with the phenomenological experience of time,¹³ it also bears the influence of the cultural environment into which she was born and in which she started her career, namely

¹³ The epigraphs to her 2010 *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, for instance, come from Proust, and she has stated in interviews the starting point for that novel being the question of “What would a contemporary book about time look like?” (See Milholin, Alford).

postmodernism.¹⁴ For Kelly, these writers' desire to discard certain elements of literary postmodernism combine with its unavoidable influence in the post-boomer acknowledgement that history remains a problem for fiction. In other words, returning to an engagement with history does not entail a concomitant renewal of confidence in the novel's ability to engage with and represent temporality and history. Rather these writers bring to this revival a postmodern inheritance of doubt and skepticism.

The Invisible Circus follows Phoebe as she retraces Faith's journey around Europe, using postcards Faith sent as a trail. Faith travelled in 1970, a wild and idealistic hippie searching for meaning, only to become recruited by the Red Army Faction in Berlin, accidentally kill a janitor and then kill herself in an Italian village because she couldn't live with the guilt. Phoebe doesn't know this when she leaves for Europe, only that her sister killed herself. She learns the truth of Faith's life from Wolf, Faith's old boyfriend whom she meets in Munich, where he now lives with his fiancée Carla. He agrees to accompany Phoebe to Italy. During their journey they embark on an affair and Wolf slowly and reluctantly reveals the truth. The novel repeatedly constructs history as a problem, most notably through its introduction of a number of problematic temporal experiences, the most significant of which are: Phoebe's sense of belatedness with regards to the counterculture and politics of the 1960s; the temporality of the detective story which Egan uses to structure Phoebe's investigation of Faith's death; the anticipation of the future; and the relation between impulses towards historicization and myth-making.

1. Belatedness

The opening lines of the novel remark of Phoebe: "She'd missed it" (3). Ostensibly, Phoebe is late because she saw a poster advertising the wrong date for a music festival. This festival, however, is a "Revival" (4) ten years after the original. She is doubly late, then: by ten years and by one day. The erroneously printed posters are explained by Kyle, an organizer of the 1978 event who was also present at the original. Kyle knew Faith, and Phoebe treats him as a piece of tangible evidence of the past, yet he is also testament to time's irrevocable forward momentum: once a hippie known as Catnip, Kyle has "just

¹⁴ Egan was born in 1962 and published *The Invisible Circus*, her first novel, in 1995. Richard Powers was born in 1957 and published his first novel *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* in 1985. For Franzen, those dates are 1959 and 1988 (*The Twenty-Seventh City*); for Whitehead 1969 and 1999 (*The Intuitionist*); for Wallace 1962 and 1987 (*The Broom of the System*).

finished his second year of law school” (5), his hair is cut short, and Phoebe notes with regret that his apartment is not the “time warp” she had “hoped to enter” (6). Her encounter with Kyle encapsulates the temporal dimensions of Phoebe’s existence at the start of the novel: if the past is at all retrievable, it is so only in a way that registers its status as past, creating a ghostly double effect. Remarking on Phoebe’s resemblance to her dead sister, Kyle says “if you told me right now you were Faith, I bet I’d believe you” (9), but what he sees as connection Phoebe understands as something more akin to this doubling. Her resemblance to her sister only serves to emphasize their difference: Phoebe “still wore Faith’s clothing sometimes, [but] [n]othing quite fit ... Try as Phoebe might to bridge the gap between herself and Faith, some difference always remained” (9). At this early point in the novel, however, Phoebe’s frustration at this reality obscures her acknowledgement of it; she hopes that “one day that difference would vanish” (9).

For Kyle, the finality of Faith’s death is echoed by something about the temporality of the 1960s that makes it equally unrecoverable: “Sometimes I feel like she’s still back there ... In that time. I miss it like hell” (12). By talking this way, Kyle suggests a link between the vanished, distinctive quality of sixties temporality and Faith’s death, as if one is responsible for the other. It is a notion Phoebe shares: “Me too” she replies (12). Yet if she “misses” that time – and, by extension, her sister – she does so in a number of ways. Phoebe clearly grieves for Faith, and the desire to “retrace her sister’s steps” is not the “spontaneous” decision she claims it is but rather something she has “always known” she would do (9), but her mistake about the festival reinforces the sense that a temporal gap exists between herself and her sister that means she will always miss her. This is not just because “Faith was always older” (40), but rather due to a belatedness that condemns her to watch her sister’s exploits from a distance: “Beside the vivid record of her sister’s childhood, Phoebe’s own existence felt shadowy” (39). The vividness of Faith’s life – even in death – is such that it seeps into Phoebe’s, with the effect that “alone she was nothing” (63). “But as part of Faith” however, “a small shape included within her sister’s outline” (63) she is able to construct a kind of second-order subjectivity for herself, one that defines her in terms of her sister’s life and death. Clearly insufficient, “Phoebe picture[s] herself in the eyes of her peers as half ghostly, a transparent outline whose precise movements [are] impossible to follow” (72). This trope is repeated throughout the first of the novel’s four sections, to the extent that we come to understand Phoebe’s later coming-of-age as a way of giving more substance to this outline.

Such is the power of Faith's dominance that this belated quality spreads out into the rest of Phoebe's life, most clearly in her relationship with her mother. In one scene Phoebe gives her mother a necklace to mark what would have been her parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary (Phoebe's father died before Faith), only to be told that she's a year late. Later in the novel, Phoebe's ghostly aspect, her pale repetition of Faith, is apparently recognized by her mother, who resists Phoebe's desire to travel to Europe because she fears too accurate a repetition of Faith's fate. If Phoebe's existence is characterized by this incompleteness which is made all the more vivid for being halfway between presence and absence – like a shadow, an echo or a ghost – its root lies in a sense expressed in her early conversation with Kyle that "I wasn't really there" because "I was a kid" (12). Her incompleteness comes not from missing out entirely on her sister's exploits, but being present yet unable to take part, a younger, incomplete version of the adult her sister was becoming.

2. The Detective

Initially a gambit to impress Kyle, Phoebe's decision to go to Europe becomes an attempt to escape the incompleteness this belatedness creates by reorienting the temporal coordinates of her life toward catching up with her sister, a move ultimately doomed to failure. Yet in so doing, Egan adopts the manner and structure of the detective story, which begins with the formulation of Faith's death as a mystery. Although this comes fairly early in the novel, Egan also suggests it rejects a governing narrative of suicide ("everyone says she jumped" [7]; "it would've been pretty hard to fall there by accident" [8]) to which the only dissenter is Phoebe: "It was a mystery: ... Something had happened to Faith" (31). If the quest to find out what happened to her sister is initially a personal investigation, Phoebe's association of Faith with "the sixties" (31) renders it significant beyond the O'Connor family, at least as Phoebe sees it, who finds that images aid this association. Although dismissive of "scholarly and journalistic accounts" of the sixties, Phoebe is drawn to fashion magazines in which "[a]nother world gleam[s]" and in which she "half expect[s] to find a picture of Faith" (31). This is not entirely fanciful on Phoebe's part, because even in life Faith took on an aspect of an image, a figure that "granted access" to a mythic alternative world (50). Indeed Phoebe "grew up surrounded by sketches of Faith" (39) painted by their father, a passion which inspired its own myths in his children (to which we will return). That these images of Faith have a power of their own leads

Phoebe's brother Barry to attempt to throw them away ("There was Faith, face-up on the concrete" [27]). It is a power jealously guarded; it is "only Faith" (34) that ever appears in them.

The effect of Faith's life in the world of images is to extend her presence, adding to her vitality in such a way that she takes on a double significance – as sister and as mythic figure. Going over the newspaper clippings from her sister's room that she has saved, Phoebe returns to an image depicting violent police repression of a 1967 Oakland protest against the draft in which Faith is featured, wounded by a police officer. If images are often powerful spurs to memory, here that memory is as much one of the previous effect of that image as it is of Faith returning from the protest and showing her younger brother and sister her wound. Phoebe remembers that as she "pressed her palm to [Faith's] wound, she found her eyes wandering again and again to the newspaper picture. Faith was here in this kitchen but she was there, too, in the news" (85).¹⁵

Although it will become more pronounced as she arrives in Europe, Phoebe's propensity towards playing the detective is suggested in the first section, as she spies on her mother meeting her boss and discovering that he is now also her lover: "The sight of her mother alone on the street, unaware of her own presence, was strangely compelling" (76). If there is a powerful erotic charge to detection and investigation encoded here which prefigures the interrelation of sexuality and detection in Phoebe's affair with Wolf during her trip, Egan emphasizes this further as she details Phoebe's shocked reaction to discovering her mother's romance. She wanders San Francisco, picking a woman at random to stalk as she moves through the city's red light district:

Phoebe passed the Condor, where the famous Carol Doda danced; Big Al's, where tired-looking girls in spike heels and bathing suits were poised at the entrance before red velvet curtains ... Phoebe allowed herself only a glance, not wanting to draw attention, but she longed to stare at the women (80-1).

Egan notes how "[s]he'd done this many times before, followed people who she sensed could lead her to shadowy, interesting places. Always at a distance" (80). Here her role as

¹⁵ The immediacy of the counterculture's entering the mediascape is also picked up on by Christopher Sorrentino in *Trance*, where the Patty Hearst figure goes to a movie and thinks she sees her story depicted in it (398-9). Some of the effects of such immediacy will be explored in chapter three which focuses on *Trance*.

detective carries a trace of her belatedness. If the distance here is spatial, when she comes to follow Faith it will be temporal; she will be in the same place at a different time. Once she has embarked on her trip, Phoebe delights in the frisson of excitement the detective's role affords her and the eroticism of secrets becomes more pronounced. Meeting Wolf in Munich, she explores his and Carla's apartment, "feel[ing] an element of subterfuge. She imagined herself as an undercover agent posing as a dinner guest, with orders to search the premises by evening's end" (214). Investigating Wolf's life provides the stimulus she denied herself in San Francisco, the "sensation [of] other people's lives spread open around her, ... having the power to go inside rooms you'd glimpsed through street windows" (216). That Wolf becomes the target of her most sustained detective fantasies anticipates his role later in the novel as the key to the mystery of Faith's death. Searching Wolf's apartment, her nascent attraction to him and the eroticism of detection become intertwined in language which simultaneously evokes the climactic discovery of hidden truth and sexual climax: "She began probing in earnest now, hands shaking with guilty fear, a beat of excitement in her chest. She was looking for something. A particular thing, Phoebe thought, a secret" (221).

As Phoebe embarks on her journey, the belatedness established in the early parts of the novel in her static San Francisco life – where her relationship to Faith is dominated by a retrospective nostalgia – is supplemented with the desire to catch up with Faith through the retracing of her footsteps. Phoebe begins to look forward, rather than back, but ahead to an ending she already knows. This temporal structure reminds us of Tzvetan Todorov's discussion of double narratives in detective fiction – the story of the crime and the story of the investigation of the crime. In *The Invisible Circus*, this double structure is transposed onto the story of Faith's death and the story of Phoebe's investigation of Faith's death. Todorov, in his essay "The Typology of Detective Fiction," distinguishes the whodunit from the thriller and the suspense novel by elaborating how these two stories work. He claims that the first story – that of the crime, usually a death – is "absent but real" (46). By this he means that although the reader and the detective are faced with the undeniable fact of a dead body, neither have any real access to the actual event in which that body came to die. That access is always mediated by the second story, which, it follows, is "present but insignificant," having "no importance in itself" (46) beyond this job of mediation.¹⁶

¹⁶ In this regard, *The Invisible Circus* marks the beginning of an abiding interest on Egan's part in the activity of the detective. In an interview with *Contemporary Fiction* in 2006 she talked about her second novel and how "early in the process of writing *Look at Me* I sought the help of two private detectives" (Reilly, 451).

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The event of Faith's death in *The Invisible Circus* resembles Todorov's description of the first story insofar as it is entirely undeniable but access to it is prohibited by a narrative of that death which conflates motive and simple occurrence in the interests of preserving an illusory emotional stability. In the O'Connor family, Faith's death is treated as a silent – and therefore absent – presence, most explicitly in Phoebe's relationship with her mother. When Phoebe mentions Faith, it causes "a long silence" (67) to fall over their conversation.

Faith's role as image also serves to obscure the reality of her death. One of Egan's two epigraphs is from Ludwig Feuerbach and concerns the temporal present's preference for image over reality. Egan plays on the meaning of the word 'image': if photographs, news reports and postcards are important artefacts for Phoebe's memory of Faith, Egan also suggests that having an image of someone involves creating a fiction around that person. These two senses of the word – literal and metaphorical – are connected. Phoebe memorializes Faith in a particular way through the images that survive her, but these pictures offer a version of Faith that is incomplete. When Phoebe holds a picture of her sister in her hand, she both literally holds a physical image and uses that picture to create and uphold a mental image of her. Faith's postcards work in this way too: they are conspicuous in their revelation of Faith's zeal for adventure and her optimism, yet they tell only a partial story. There are no postcards explaining her involvement with the Red Army Faction, or the break-up of her relationship with Wolf, nor her accidental murder of a janitor. Similarly, on Phoebe's journey the postcards are only partial clues and she throws them in the Seine after taking LSD, seemingly realizing their obfuscatory power: "the postcards were leading her astray, they were bad clues leading her to destruction" (173). That she throws a picture of Faith into the river at the same time suggests that Phoebe is slowly beginning to understand that her idea of her sister is, at least in part, artificial.

If Faith's death is absent but real, does Phoebe's investigation conform to Todorov's typology by being insignificant? At face value it certainly doesn't, as the novel is in many ways the story of how Phoebe's investigation allows for her maturation. Examined more closely however, the question becomes one of priority: if Phoebe's investigation is

In *Look at Me*, the parallels between the detective story and reading and writing literature are noted by Egan herself: "'Detective stories. The genre is almost as old as the profession, the two have been intertwined practically from the beginning.' 'Detectives write books,' I said ruefully. 'That's right,' she said. 'A surprising number try to write detective novels, as if writing books were a corollary of the experience of being a detective.'" (346).

significant inasmuch as it is an agent of her maturation, one might suggest that because Faith's death is understood in relation to the fate of sixties politics, it retains a higher degree of importance and significance. Egan suggests that these two stories are intertwined in such a way as to make Phoebe's maturation conditional on her discovery of the truth about Faith's death. Or to put it another way, what Faith's death says about the legacy of the countercultural period is revealed through Phoebe's discovery of the real facts of that death. This is what Todorov spoke of, because what makes the second story insignificant in his view is its dependence on the first; as he puts it, the second story "serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime" (46). Nevertheless, even while agreeing with Todorov on the structural relation between the two stories and their individual roles, one may take issue with his designation of the second as insignificant insofar as that second story is the vehicle by which both the detective and the reader come to understand the reality and importance of the crime: if it didn't exist, the crime would remain inaccessible. Egan suggests that were it not for Phoebe's investigation, certain realities about the countercultural years would have remained unrevealed.

This process of revelation is at the centre of Peter Brooks' reading – in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* – of the Sherlock Holmes story "The Musgrave Ritual." Brooks is keen to show how the detective story becomes "the narrative of narratives," a "laying-bare of the structure of all narrative in that it dramatizes the role of *sjuzēt* and *fabula* and the nature of their relation" (25). He does this by aligning *sjuzēt* with metaphor and the selective, paradigmatic axis of semiotics, and *fabula* with metonymy and the combinatory, syntagmatic axis. He shows how Holmes is presented in this particular story with a ritual he is told is a metaphor for the Musgrave family's inheritance and tradition. By turning it into metonymy – by plotting it out in a series of sequential actions – he discovers the ritual consists of directions to the crown lost in the overthrow of an English king. In doing so, Holmes reactivates a deeper metaphor of "regicide and restoration" (Brooks, 26). By acting out the ritual, Holmes is meeting "a clear condition of all classic detective fiction, that the detective repeat, go over again, the ground that has been covered by his predecessor, the criminal" (24). It is this that makes the detective novel so emblematic of narrative as a whole, insofar as narrative always tells of something that has already happened. Additionally – and this is what Todorov points out – the repetition the detective story makes manifest is that of *sjuzēt* and *fabula*, namely the plotting of events and the events themselves. Revelation is important for this question of metaphor and metonymy, and it is where the Holmes story and *The Invisible Circus* share

some interesting characteristics. Both Holmes and Phoebe are given particular metaphoric pictures of the ‘crime.’ Holmes plots out the geography encoded in the ritual and Phoebe plots out the geography marked by the postcards, travelling from city to city, a journey which recalls another meaning of the word ‘plot’ – the plotting of points on a map. For Brooks, this re-enactment concerns the kind of “Narrative Transformations” found in Todorov’s essay of the same name. In this essay, Todorov notes how in such transformations, “start and finish stand in the relation ... of ‘the same-but-different’” as Brooks puts it (27). Put differently, detective fiction is less concerned with the replacement of falsity with truth but rather the undertaking of a contextualization – we might say historicization – of the fact of the crime, which allows the detective to identify the perpetrator. Thus in the Holmes story, the crime looks the same as it did at the start, with the exception that we now know the identity of the murderer. *The Invisible Circus* works along these lines too: Faith *did* jump and it *was* in the village initially thought, but the *reasons* for her suicide (the closest *The Invisible Circus* has to a murderer) have been revealed. (Here Egan’s novel also alludes to the familiar equation from detective fiction: you find the motive, and you find the killer). As in Brooks’ reading of the Holmes story, it is not that the identity of the dead person changes, or any of the initial appearances turn out to be illusions, but rather that a clearer *explanation* of those appearances has been brought to light.

In *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, Mark Currie also makes reference to Todorov when he notes that “the temporality of the detective story is a double time – a double movement which is at the same time forwards and backwards, working forwards from the crime through the events of the investigation, and in the process working backwards to reconstruct events which lead up to the crime” (2007, 36). Because the detective usually starts from a dead body, the first story can really only be told backwards from the moment of death back through the events at the crime scene itself to the motivations and opportunities that meant the death happened at that particular place and time. By contrast, the second story – that of the investigation – is characterized by a strict chronology, what Todorov calls the “slow apprenticeship” of the detective and reader, in which “we examine clue after clue, lead after lead” (45). This latter is certainly true of Phoebe’s investigation, made explicit by the conceit of Faith’s postcards and a joint Kyle gives her in San Francisco with instructions to pass on to friends in Munich. Phoebe follows the postcards and Kyle’s instructions like a trail. There is no suggestion that Phoebe might skip this process altogether and proceed straight to the village in Italy where

Faith died, and the novel confirms the impossibility of this when Phoebe meets the key to her successful deciphering of the mystery – Wolf – at the very flat in Munich in which Kyle’s friends live; the coincidence that those friends are away for the summer and Wolf is house-sitting merely confirms the necessity of following the trail. The novel requires Phoebe to follow lead after lead and after she throws away the postcards, her only lead is to go to Munich. As Egan puts it, after getting rid of the postcards, “there was nothing to guide her [but] if you chose a place at random, how could it matter whether you went there?” (180).

3. Historicization, Myth, Anticipation

If both Phoebe and the detective know the end, it is an individual known event in an unknown context, an end without a past leading up to it. In this situation, it is difficult not to engage in what Brooks calls the “anticipation of retrospection” (23) which Currie describes as viewing “the present as past, or as the object of a future memory” (2007, 30). In narrative, this involves imagining the point in the future when we will have reached the end of the story and everything we will have read will come together and make sense.¹⁷ The investigatory nature of the detective story makes this anticipation all the more explicit, as we do not just want to understand the meaning of particular events but also to assign responsibility for that meaning to an individual. Yet that known end is simultaneously the event that initiates both Phoebe’s and the detective’s investigations. They are as dominated by the past as they are by the future. Phoebe, for instance, has a “present life [that is] nothing but the aftermath of something vanished” (73). This experience – of being caught between a known-yet-unhistoricized future and a past that dictates elements of the future – is present in re-enactment, and in *The Invisible Circus* it is the point where the re-enactment’s relation to myth-making is introduced. What Phoebe doesn’t grasp immediately is the historical nature of her own re-enactment of Faith’s journey. Wolf explains that in his and Faith’s travels around Europe, they were guided by an idea of Faith and Phoebe’s dead father, much as Phoebe is guided by an idea of her dead sister. Wolf suggests that he and Faith also felt a sense of belatedness, but whereas Phoebe feels like she’s missed the sixties, Wolf and Faith felt like they’d missed the Beat and bohemian heyday of the 1950s. Faith and Phoebe’s father was contemporaneous with the Beats, and his hobby as a painter allows Faith and Wolf to create a version of him as an

¹⁷ I argue in chapter two that this is the governing structural principle behind Dana Spiotta’s *Eat the Document*.

“acquaintance...” of “Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, [and] Michael McClure” who was present on the “legendary night when Allen Ginsberg challenged a heckler to take off his clothes, then flung off his own before a stunned audience” (41). Wolf says that for the sixties travellers, Faith and Phoebe’s father was a God-like figure for whom they acted out a particular vision of freedom. It takes Wolf to prove the unsustainability of this myth, after Phoebe rejects her mother’s claim that “your father was not a talented painter” (101) and her suggestion that Faith’s claim – which Phoebe holds on to – that he died young because he hated his job at IBM is itself a myth.

Wolf elaborates the dangers of false histories throughout the novel by performing a contextualization and historicization that recalls that present in the detective story: the events themselves don’t change, but the reasons for them and the circumstances around them become clearer. Explaining Faith’s myth of her father, for instance, he suggests that this myth is partly responsible for her fate. As they travelled around Europe, the story of the father who knew the Beats became more and more exaggerated and took on a sort of talismanic power to urge Faith on to crazier and crazier things. She caught the attention of the Red Army Faction’s recruiter in Berlin by telling him the story of

how IBM had ground her father down, drained his spirit away until he was empty, until his very blood revolted. She said things Wolf had never heard before: how it felt to watch her father die, how there was nothing she could do, she’d tried everything she could think of ... All her life she’d been trying to fight back, she said (236)

In Wolf’s retelling, this myth becomes the impetus to do “something big” (234). Egan herself notes the danger of such myths in the interview with *Contemporary Literature*:

What Phoebe ultimately learns is that the kind of heightened reality Faith was searching for cannot possibly be sustained over time. Whether you are a writer or not, the imagination is a superb antidote to reality; I’ve devoted my life to it. But we all know what happens when a fantasy is mistaken for an alternate way of life. (457)

If Phoebe “ultimately learns” that myths can’t be sustained, she does this mostly through her interaction with Wolf, whose impulse is towards historicization and demystification, towards the kind of “historicizing project” (2011, 409) which Kelly understands Egan’s

later novel *Look at Me* as possessing. There are numerous instances of this in the novel, beginning with Phoebe and Wolf's trip to a castle outside Munich, which Phoebe thinks she's seen before despite never visiting it. Wolf explains that she has seen it before: it's Neuschwanstein, which Disney used for *Sleeping Beauty*. In a repetition of the operation we've noted in Phoebe's relationship to Faith, the image's ability to usurp reality allows Phoebe to "dreamily" (198) imagine scenarios of her and Wolf as a couple, walking around a castle built by a mad king suffering such a "sweet sorrow" that it was "worth any price" to build (199). She maintains her romanticism in the face of Wolf's emphasis on economics, even when he tells her that King Ludwig bankrupted the country in the process of building the castle, leaving people to start "killing themselves to put food on the table while old Ludwig was picking out curtains" (200).

Another, more key example of the tension between historicization and myth is present in the event that gives the novel its name. When Phoebe was young and Faith still alive, Phoebe came downstairs in the early morning to find her sister, Wolf and a group of friends recently returned from a party:

Faith and Wolf leaned at the stove, their backs to the door, surrounded by unfamiliar people who appeared to be in costume: a slim, dark-haired girl like the Queen of Spades in her floor-length purple dress of crushed velvet; another girl with ropes of white-gold hair and a sparkling white pants suit. The man nearest the door wore a top hat (55)

This man speaks to Phoebe in lines from *Alice in Wonderland*, which she recognizes and responds to in kind, which helps install in her mind an image of this night as the entry to Faith's "brilliant, magical world" (50), especially when Faith explains they'd been to something called the Invisible Circus (57). Nevertheless, for all that the scene is "intoxicating" (57), "like something from an old book" (59) or a "spell" cast upon her (61), its significance at this point is its relation to the O'Connor siblings' dynamic, and the sublimation of their grief over their father's death. Faith, for instance, falls deep into the counterculture because it allows her to imagine a "vibration underground" in which "everything's going to be different" (58). The strength of Faith's conviction leads Phoebe to follow her sister and reject her brother who is also awoken by the revellers and comes down to make them leave. Instead Phoebe stays with Faith and Wolf, imagining "[s]he was Alice, downing the potion, waiting to see what would happen" (59). This is

uncharacteristic of Phoebe, who is “anxious to please all” (61); what makes her able to reject Barry is his too-clear embodiment and exhibition of the family’s grief, his obsession with gaining the posthumous approval of their father by building from his “forgotten sketches” a “wretched sound machine” (61) that was a task in their father’s engineering classes. Phoebe doesn’t want to see the scene as her brother does because he understands better than her “how strange and fragile it was, how it might whirl away as suddenly as those children stepping back through the wardrobe out of Narnia, into their real lives” (60). This slippage between the real world and an imagined creation affords the early stirrings of their father’s myth as Faith initiates it. She is sure “Daddy would love” (59) her exhilaration and as they move out onto the house’s roof to watch the sunrise, Faith imagines their father smiling down his benediction: “Maybe Dad can see us” (63).

The actual Invisible Circus is hardly present here save for Faith’s casual reference to “a big party in a church” (57), and through Phoebe’s eyes it even appears that Faith and her friends have somehow created it, rather than simply attended an event planned and organized by others. Faith seems somehow both at the core of the sixties and to surround it, with its historical significance channelled into the O’Connors’ domestic drama. Later in the novel, however, Phoebe asks Wolf: “can you tell me what it actually was? I’ve tried looking it up in books but it’s never there” (194). He explains that it was a “Digger event, no publicity, no media, just the night itself” held in the “Glide Memorial Church in the Tenderloin” of San Francisco (194). If this historicizes it simply by giving it a location and naming the organizers, in a telling foreshadowing of later doubts about the reasons for his historicization Wolf actually gets part of it wrong: there was publicity for it in the form of posters advertising a “72 hour environmental community happening” which are now available to view on the Diggers website (Anon.a.). Interestingly, those who maintain the website are very aware of the perils of recording history, and that historicization is not a simple route to establishing truth – that it comes with its own set of problems. These introductory comments to the Chronology section make that clear:

Chronologies are an important but often overlooked tool in writing history. Getting the facts straight begins with having accurate dates. This is my attempt to research the dates of events in the Sixties. One thing I have discovered is the problem of presenting a chronology: what to include and what to exclude. For example, the Digger chronology should include the history of the Artists Liberation Front, but what about the Fillmore Auditorium and the San Francisco rock ‘n roll scene? What

about general Sixties events, or the New Left? Civil rights movement? At a certain point, the original intent of presenting a chronology of the Diggers becomes diluted and overwhelmed by the other threads in the tapestry of time. My solution is to create The Sixties Date Machine, a database that will contain all sorts of events, from JFK's assassination to the Merry Pranksters, from Free Store to Free Huey. The database will have multiple keywords attached to each event and will be searchable such that the user can create her or his own chronology. I have had search pages up for the past year or so, but recently decided to shift emphasis. For now, I will present the chronologies that are relevant to the Digger history and will relegate the search pages to a secondary place on the web. (Anon.b)¹⁸

Wolf, for his part, suggests that as an event the Invisible Circus can only be understood historically, even from his relatively close vantage point (he speaks only eleven years after it happened). It was “the usual thing, in a way, except it wasn't usual yet” (194). In other words, it is “usual” in relation to a narrative of the sixties and the Diggers that developed *subsequently*; its familiarity comes from its place in a recognizable historical narrative applicable in retrospect. If it wasn't the normal thing “yet,” as Wolf maintains, the Diggers website reveals at least that the event had a history and context: the Diggers were active from May 1965, and the Invisible Circus took place between Friday 24th and Sunday 26th February 1967. Beyond this, though, is a rather complex temporality: if the temporal reference of the word “usual” is to narratives built up after the fact, or to our retrospective ability to assign a character to the group based on the similarity of repeated actions, the “yet” dwells in the time of the event itself, even though Wolf narrates it as history, from the vantage point of 1978; it is a brief return to the time of the narrated events on the part of the narration. But then what to make of the “wasn't”? It certainly refers to the time of the Invisible Circus, which “wasn't” at that point the “usual” thing, but it is also clearly in the past tense, suggesting that it may indeed belong to the time of the narration: it suggests a doubled time, as if one can be present in 1967 yet simultaneously be aware of the future narrativization of such a present. The effect of this sentence is to circulate temporal references around a loop between the time of the narration and the time of the narrated events, in which we view retrospection and anticipation simultaneously.

¹⁸ How Sorrentino's *Trance* presents particularly acutely the way attempts at historical accuracy and/or instrumentation “become diluted and overwhelmed by the other threads in the tapestry of time” will be part of the focus of chapter three.

The interplay Wolf evokes here is itself a historical occurrence. He explains that part of the event involved the simultaneous historicization of the actions being undertaken:

these 'reporters' were taking notes on everything that happened, then Richard Brautigan – no joke, Brautigan himself – would type up the notes into 'news bulletins' and mimeograph hundreds of copies that got passed around instantly, so not only were people doing all this crazy shit, but a lot of times they were reading about themselves doing it before they'd even finished (195)

The Diggers website calls this "an instant archive of the event" (Anon.a.) and it is clear that to a certain extent these activities partake of the "archive fever" (19) that Jacques Derrida wrote of:

the archive ... is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content *of the past* which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and its relationship to the future. The archivisation produces as much as it records the event. (17)

Derrida's logic is at play in Wolf's description of the Invisible Circus, as the news bulletins' archiving actions helped to produce the events which they were ostensibly recording. These bulletins were not merely conserving images of the past but part of the unfolding of the present; the archivization of the Invisible Circus and the event itself were inseparable. This anticipation of one's own future is precisely what Derrida means us to understand by the phrase "archiving archive"; its operation brings the past, the present and the future together.¹⁹ Yet if for Derrida this is an effect of comparatively recent computer technology, *The Invisible Circus* suggests it has an earlier precedence connected with self-awareness and -reflexivity. If the Invisible Circus historicized itself as it occurred and engaged in the kind of simultaneous anticipation and retrospection we've been discussing, it was also self-consciously aware of itself as historically significant, something which had the effect of

¹⁹ As Derrida writes: "the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. This is not the question of a concept dealing with the past which might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know in the times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in the times to come, later on or perhaps never" (27-8).

distancing the actors in the event from both the event itself and their own participation in it. As Wolf remarks: “It was all about watching ourselves happen ... This incredible feeling, standing outside, seeing the thing unfold” (195). Such self-awareness has the effect of flattening time through the kind of spatialization of history – “standing *outside*” – Fredric Jameson is famous for noting. What should in some way possess depth becomes a levelling-out of the past, the present and the future into the kind of non- or ahistorical experience Jameson observed was characteristic of postmodernism. This flattening excerpts individuals from the scene of history. If for Wolf his historicizing impulse necessarily places him and Faith more at the margins of particular events, it also includes acknowledging the historical character of that marginalization: if he and Faith are part of a broader historical narrative, then they are also in some ways distanced from its significance by the precise self-conscious awareness of such significance. Thus, Wolf’s comment that “I was a bystander” (196) comes with a double or even triple meaning: a bystander when placed in historical context, but also a bystander from history itself, which creates a distance between individual and history that itself needs to be historicized. The Diggers website notes that as the news bulletins were being produced, “[m]eanwhile, every cubicle of Glide was happening” (Anon.a.). Placed together in such terms, the instant archiving and historicization and the perpetual “happening” of the event appear much like Jameson’s famed description of “the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents” (1998, 20).

If Egan here seems to be associating elements of the New Left with a conception of temporality and history familiar from analyses of postmodernism, she does not seem to fully identify its aesthetic or moral choices with the counterculture. For instance this passage of the novel also questions the role of irony, yet here it is not the emblem of postmodernism David Foster Wallace saw it as but rather a way for Wolf to remain alert to power struggles over meaning.²⁰ For Wolf it is an adult skepticism toward dominant narratives, a healthy suspicion that things aren’t always what they seem and in this case an aid to dismantling the myths that have built up around the sixties.²¹ His remark that Phoebe

²⁰ See Wallace’s essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*.

²¹ In this sense, Wolf’s understanding of irony is similar to that proposed by Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Mary K. Holland has noted the usefulness of Fussell’s conception of irony in relation to post-postmodern fiction in her book *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*, implying that one component of the post-postmodern aesthetic is this recuperation of irony from the disaffected, negative view of it marked out by, among others, David Foster Wallace: “irony for Fussell promotes understanding, in that it cements memory: Fussell argues through numerous well-documented examples that it was exactly the ironies (truths countering expectations) of the

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is “so completely without irony ... like ... one of those tribes untouched by civilization” (196) associates such lack with a certain credulousness that allows her to ignore realities like King Ludwig’s impoverishment of his people and instead embrace fantasies about his and Faith’s life in the sixties. Indeed, towards the end of the novel, Phoebe’s acceptance of the realities of Faith’s death are marked by another observation about irony: “‘Irony,’ he said, ‘from the lips of Phoebe O’Connor.’ ‘See what you’ve done?’ she said” (302). Irony here seems to enable historical awareness, not prevent it. Rather than an operation that leads to the solipsism and ahistoricism Wallace and Jameson warned against, Egan places Wolf’s historicizing impulse next to Phoebe’s own toward myth and fantasy. Thus what Wolf targets his irony at is a myth of the sixties that both makes it something it wasn’t and threatens any continuation of the counterculture’s politics, towards which Wolf maintains sympathy if not a commitment to action. His historicization is not that of Jameson’s “Always historicize!” (1981, 9) but rather a process which admits one’s inability to fully account for history. Wolf’s zealotry is not that of the Marxist but of the failure spurred on by his shortcomings. In other words, Wolf exhibits the kind of historical realism that Reinhold Niebuhr counselled in his 1952 book *The Irony of American History*, a realism that came from a humility before historical forces. While critical and fearful of communism, Niebuhr also highlighted deficiencies in the liberal democratic system of the United States. He particularly questioned American myths of exceptionalism and the kind of utopianism that assumed it could control history. If he wrote of communism that its biggest crime was that it “imagine[d] itself the master of historical destiny” (65) Niebuhr identified a similar hubris in its liberal antagonist: “From the earliest days of its history to the present moment, there is a deep layer of Messianic consciousness in the mind of America” (69). Niebuhr repeatedly described a relation between American liberal democracy and Russian communism characterized by the latter’s extension and compounding of the errors of the former. In terms of history, this was manifest in Marxism’s more explicit and overt confidence in its role as master. Against such hubris, Niebuhr encouraged a more humble acceptance of the vastness of history:

The illusions about the possibility of managing historical destiny from any particular standpoint in history, always involves ... miscalculations about both the power and

war that caused soldiers to remember details they would have otherwise forgotten, and to wrestle these memories into some sort of understanding ... the doubleness and wordplay that this irony produced spoke to an essential truth and mourned a cultural loss – the loss of innocence and of a world of expectations. This is the modern, earnest irony that another critic of the mid-twentieth century, World War I era describes: “The ironist is ironical not because he does not care, but because he cares too much.”” (120).

the wisdom of the managers and of the weakness and the manageability of the historical “stuff” which is to be managed (72)

If Niebuhr identified the gap between America’s belief in itself and the realities of the contemporary situation as the irony of his book’s title, Wolf is suspicious of Phoebe’s idea of the sixties because it turns it into just another example of the American propensity toward self-mythologization and not the new beginning he had hoped it would be. The irony here is that such new beginnings are themselves part of American myth, but that, as Niebuhr observes, in words that might have been spoken by Wolf, “they are never quite as new as is assumed, and never remain quite as pure as when they are new” (23).²² Wolf’s irony comes from his identification of a gap between the world imagined by the idealism of the sixties and the world’s reality, and not just from his 1978 vantage but also the kind of reality that led Faith to the Red Army Faction. Nevertheless, he suggests that his younger self didn’t fully appreciate such irony, because it was smothered by arrogance, as in the following exchange:

‘When I think of that time,’ he said, ‘what I remember most was feeling like nothing could ever go wrong for me.’ He turned to Phoebe with a hard smile. ‘That’s arrogance.’

‘So how does irony fit in with that?’ she said.

Wolf smiled again. ‘Blows it to pieces.’ (197)

Wolf’s latter appreciation of the ironies of history comes from the same source as Niebuhr’s, who observed that “[o]ur age is involved in irony because so many dreams of our nation have been so cruelly refuted by history” (2).²³ If Wolf’s historicization is in part

²² Likewise, one can imagine Wolf summing up his opinion of Phoebe’s myth-making in these Niebuhrian terms: “[she] must slough off many illusions which were derived both from the experiences and the ideologies of [her] childhood” (42).

²³ A similar observation was made around twenty years later, by Robert N. Bellah in his book *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, who observed that America’s “punishment, ironically, lies in our “success”” (143). Like Niebuhr, Bellah called for a realistic appraisal of American culture – “We are not innocent, we are not the saviors of mankind, and it is well for us to grow up enough to know that” (141) – and sounded a similarly Niebuhrian note regarding history, warning of the “illusion of omnipotence” and reminding us that “[w]e do not know what the future holds and we must give up the illusion that we control it” (163). For Bellah, the late 1960s and especially the early 1970s witnessed the breaking of a covenant in which individuals’ freedom was bound up with their responsibilities toward others. Bellah was suspicious of the claims made for American exceptionalism: “is it not possible that our punishment for breaking the covenant is to be the most developed, progressive, and modern society in the world? What those adjectives point to is utter devastation – of the natural world in which we live, of the ties that bind us to others, of the innerness of spiritually sensitive personality” (143). Though not a theologian per se, Bellah, like Niebuhr, brought a compassionate and socially conscious Christian

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an attempt to account for this refutation, or at least to acknowledge it, he nonetheless finds it difficult to accept, as Niebuhr did, “the fact that no group of idealists can easily move the pattern of history toward the desired goal of peace and justice” (3). Although Wolf cannot bring himself to entirely reject the New Left’s conception of history, he understands that in many ways the politics he was involved in were a failure. Perhaps motivated by Phoebe’s naïve faith, Wolf tends to emphasize his Niebuhrian realism, particularly when she exhibits what appears to him a belief in ultimate meaning, asking questions like “What do you think it meant?” of “that whole time” (195). For Wolf, this bespeaks Phoebe’s accommodation of ideas of fate and predestination (286) as well the thought of “having everything sort of converge into one pattern” (287), something which is anathema to Niebuhr’s understanding of “historical drama” as forming “a bizarre pattern in which it is difficult to discern a real meaning” (141). Wolf says that this over-determined kind of thinking is “what nostalgia is: you see layers of meaning you never dreamed were there at the time” (287). If this historical realism is a characteristic of his 1978 vantage point, there are signs of it in his earlier, ostensibly more radical self. In fact it leads to his disconnection from Faith when she joins the Red Army Faction: “when he pictured Faith holed away in some apartment running errands for people she couldn’t even talk to, Wolf found the vision so drab, desperate. As bad as everything they’d been trying to escape” (240). If Faith is so awed by the RAF that it blinds her to the realities of her subordinated role, Wolf sees the same lack of freedom that compelled their travels in the first place. This separation from Faith is not simply individually significant, but captures in microcosm his later problems with the counterculture. While that generation’s fetishization of historicization leads to the kind of flattened temporality seen in the Diggers episode, a similarly flattened temporality comes when individuals and groups become self-congratulatory about their ability to control history – prone to what Niebuhr called “Messianic illusions” (82) – or when they become convinced of the success of their chosen course of action:

‘The weird thing about that time,’ [Wolf] said, tentative now, ‘is in a way we were nostalgic for it even while it happened. I think it had to do with constantly watching ourselves, on drugs, the whole out-of-body thing, but also on TV, in the papers. We were news. Whatever we did felt so big, so unbelievably powerful, almost like it was happening in retrospect ... It wasn’t real life.’ (287-8)

perspective to bear on matters of American history and sociology. His book is the subject of more sustained attention in the final chapter of this thesis on David Foster Wallace.

The future presses in on the present here, and Wolf and his friends find themselves viewing the present from the perspective of an imagined future. But like the Diggers episode, this also turns the present into the past, something which has passed and stirs lament. (Note too Wolf's appeal to realism at the end of this excerpt.) The historical contingency of the moment – the exhilaration of being a historical actor – is transformed into a kind of melancholy, a pre-emptive mourning for the passing of the moment that must surely come, aided by the technologies of the “so-called news media” (17) that Derrida marked as initiators of archive fever. What Wolf objects to in this scenario is the self-mythologization that assumes a sort of historical inevitability. Not, of course, that this experience didn't initially appear to him as the precise opposite, the achievement of genuine historical change through the actions of a collective will. As he puts it: “at one point it seemed clear that if we just kept pounding away like we were, some gigantic force would, like, lift us away” (195). But from his 1978 vantage point, Wolf appears to hold a similar view to that the critic James Wood expressed in a review of two novels that also deal with the legacies of the 1960s, Peter Carey's *His Illegal Self* (2008) and Hari Kunzru's *My Revolution* (2007), agreeing that “eventual political failure was birthed by the very exaggeration of political success” (“Notes”). Through a retrospective lens that ‘knows’ that no “gigantic force” came, Wolf places blame at the counterculture's very understanding of history, one deformed by an illusion of historical mastery.

4. Conclusions: Postmodernism, Post-Boomers, Historical Realism

Phoebe does eventually shed most of the myths she's built up around Faith and comes to historicize her sister's death, gaining

a vision of her sister unlike any she'd had before: a girl like herself, reaching desperately for something she couldn't see but sensed was there, a thing that always seemed to evade her. Reaching violently, giving herself to that violence, only to find, when normal life resumed, that she'd done a thing she couldn't live with (334-5)

With this realization, Phoebe comes to appreciate that her feelings of belatedness and the desire to catch up with Faith have obscured the fact that “[t]ime never stopped, it only seemed to” (337). Nonetheless, *The Invisible Circus* is not a novel that offers the tidy conclusion these events seem to mark. Instead, Egan suggests that Phoebe's historicization actually inspires in her thoughts of the future, a temporal realm which had “always been a

blank” (263) before she met Wolf again in Munich: “her own future had always seemed unreal to Phoebe when she tried to imagine it” (286). To a certain extent, this is nothing more than evidence of her slipping out of Faith’s shadow and starting to think about her own future life rather than her sister’s past one. Yet the impetus for such thoughts is interesting, and points to a larger point Egan is making about historical knowledge. It is Phoebe’s time with Wolf that leads her to imagine the future. Furthermore, this imagination takes the form of precisely the kind of anticipation of retrospection Wolf identifies with the counterculture, an anticipation of which he, in his role as Phoebe’s lover, is at the centre of:

Phoebe felt herself hurtling forward in time until she was looking back from an imaginary future at these days with Wolf, at this very moment. My time with Wolf, she would think, those first days with Wolf, and pictured even now how the memory would break across her ... This vision tumbled over Phoebe with the force of revelation: she would stand somewhere and look back, she would live a life. (297)

What exactly is going on here? Peter Brooks suggests that “[p]erhaps we would do best to speak of the *anticipation of retrospection* as our chief tool in making sense of narrative” (23, Brooks’ emphasis). We might say, then, that Phoebe’s reaction to her exposure to a new narrative (Wolf’s) necessarily involves this crucial part of narrative understanding. By definition, such anticipation is something undergone in the midst of a story, which is true of Phoebe at the moment she thinks these thoughts. Yet I think its real significance lies in the way the novel withholds simple lessons about temporality and history, because Phoebe’s exhibition of a temporal imagination that Wolf has associated with the failures of the counterculture simultaneously brings to light the existence and registers the failure of an ulterior motive on Wolf’s part for his historicization. We can understand this by first retracing Phoebe’s temporal experience over the course of the novel.

Phoebe begins the novel facing this question: how does one make sense of past events and their present (and future) ramifications, and one’s relation to those events? One way is to create myths or fables in which an explanatory narrative is laid over events, stringing them together into a chain that aims to exhibit the worth or importance of a particular moral or ideological formation. Phoebe’s narrative of Faith is in this vein, though it is a paler version insofar as her ideological interest is confused. Nevertheless, it is important to note that she begins the novel assured of the validity, the importance and above all the

correctness of the activities of the counterculture, of which Faith was a part and whom Phoebe upholds as exemplary of it; to criticize the counterculture would involve dismantling her ideal of Faith, something she isn't prepared initially to do. Phoebe's is therefore not a critical stance toward the period, and this lack of criticism comes mostly from the personal way she has framed it: although she envies the youthful idealism and the power of people not much older than herself to change the world, on the whole she remains ignorant of the particular political stakes involved. It is not what those young people changed the world *to*, or from, that interests her so much as their pure agency, their ability to shape the course of events. So in addition to lacking political awareness, she lacks a historical appreciation of the counterculture. Furthermore, the collectivity and community these actors exhibited is less interesting to her than the fact that someone she knew, her sister no less, was part of it – she has a personal connection to those events. In Phoebe's hands, and despite her obsession with them, the sixties have become incorporated into a domestic, familial drama. The film adaptation of *The Invisible Circus*, directed by Adam Brooks in 2001, takes this element of the novel to be dominant. Although ultimately unsuccessful, the film is revealing inasmuch as it clarifies these aspects of Phoebe's idea of Faith, and it plays to a teen audience whose interpretation it suspects will slant towards individual coming-of-age, familial frustrations, and sexual discovery. In Brooks' hands, Egan's novel loses all sense of a politically charged world in which these events occur; the effect is to de-historicize it, to turn it into the kind of nostalgic cinema Jameson wrote of. Because the novel is more attuned to the interrelations between individual stories and historical narratives, a sense of scale is present. The film foregoes this. A comparison of the way the book and film depict Faith's abandonment by the Red Army Faction is instructive here. In the novel, leaving Faith is understood as collateral in the larger task of escaping the surveillance of the German security services: this is not to say that they don't feel the need to get rid of an untrustworthy element in Faith, but her role is understood as part of a larger system of paranoia, prevention and crucially political *cause*. Their choice to jettison Faith is informed by politics, not personal relationships. In the film however, the RAF actively construct a ruse to get Faith out of the apartment before packing up and leaving. While this might make more sense were Phoebe to tell this story, it is Wolf who does, and the novel clearly gives us to understand that Faith's importance to the RAF is at best negligible: she is given the comparatively minor task of cutting an escape hole in a fence, and she fails even this task. Strangely, the film also includes Faith's complaint that she is surplus to requirements yet simultaneously tries to suggest that the RAF would spend time creating a story to rid themselves of this insignificant figure.

This is where Wolf's ulterior motive comes in. If the novel is clearer in its contextualization of Phoebe's individualization of the sixties, it nonetheless also suggests that Wolf's role as historicist is motivated – at least in part – by his own individual relation to the politics of the sixties and his concern to escape a sense of guilt and responsibility for his own actions; he watched Faith jump off the cliff and failed to stop her. If placing events into broader historical contexts has a beneficial effect on Phoebe, Wolf also hopes to dilute his own “[u]nfinished business” (252) in the larger waters of history. His mantra “guilt is irrelevant” (290) is an attempt to shake free the influence of the past. One of the ironies of the novel is that Wolf, who is at first presented (through Phoebe's eyes) as clearly distinct from his former self – he looks different, dresses differently, lives on a different continent, speaks a different language, is engaged to a different girl, does a different job, even has different body language – actually has a much closer connection to the sixties than Phoebe does, who seems at first to be entirely composed through her relation to the decade. (In a way of course this is unsurprising, given Wolf actually took part in the events described). Seen in this light, whereas Phoebe's temporal experience is characterized by belatedness and the attempt to catch up, Wolf's is partly defined by trying to outrun time; as he says to Phoebe when he feels her slipping away into thoughts of the past, “right now is good” (288). Yet he is also aware of the futility of outrunning it: “Wolf had heard a voice that said, You knew it was coming; well, here it is” (331). Here Egan seems to be rehearsing her engagement with the gothic Adam Kelly observes in *Look at Me* and her later novel *The Keep* (2006), especially the way “the gothic reminds us, through its desiccated forms, of history's nagging power” (2011, 407). Yet Egan also suggests that the dynamic between Phoebe and Wolf is not simply myth-maker on one side and historicist on the other, but rather that over the course of the novel these two ‘sides’ move toward one another.

Amy Hungerford has noted that for “a new generation of scholars born at or after the end of the 1960s” the decade is “history, not memory—an advantage when it comes to the business of historicizing” (416). For these scholars, “the politics of the 1960s are less a nostalgic ideal than an ambivalent example of what happens when institutional politics turns into cultural politics” (416). *The Invisible Circus* reverses Hungerford's first point and incorporates both possibilities of her second: Wolf took part and views it with ambivalence, Phoebe didn't and views it nostalgically. That said, it is precisely the fact that the sixties *are* for Wolf memory, rather than history, that proves an obstacle to his successful disentanglement from – and ultimate forgetting (through historicization) of –

that time. While on one level he plays the disinterested historian, on another he is an individual mired in the “unfinished business” of the time, still dealing with the deaths of friends and lovers and what he considers to be the failure of his generation’s aims. Notably, it takes a member of the subsequent generation (to which both Phoebe and Egan herself belong) to release him from such tortures: “He looked free. And she herself had occasioned that freedom – not Faith or Carla, not anyone else.” (347). “Not Faith or Carla” – that is to say, not someone from his own generation, not someone from the sixties. In this way Egan seems to be prefiguring Hungerford’s suggestion that the best historicists of the 1960s will be – in the words of a special issue of the *Yale Journal of Criticism* (which Hungerford edited) dedicated to the decade – those “Who Weren’t There” (McCann and Szalay, 2005a). In this context we remember Phoebe’s complaint to Kyle at the beginning of *The Invisible Circus* that “I wasn’t really there” (12). But Phoebe is not the best example. Although she may not have taken part in the sixties as such, she was born a little earlier than Hungerford’s generation of scholars. Egan was born in 1978, she was born at the beginning rather than “at the end or after the end of the 1960s.” She is just as conflicted as Wolf, though for different reasons. While she certainly has a “nostalgic ideal” about the sixties, such idealization cannot be true nostalgia as she was too young to take part. Rather, while the manifestations of her view of the sixties may appear nostalgic in form – insofar as it looks back fondly on a past time and aims to recreate it in some way – it is deformed by her sense of belatedness into something rather more complicated: she desires to turn the clock back *historically*, but not individually. That is to say she wants to return to the sixties as her eighteen year-old self. Either that or she wants to recapture the spirit of the decade for her present time. Whichever it is, her desire to access (her idea of) the sixties results in a separation of individual and history similar to that observed above in both the Diggers episode of the novel and in the film adaptation.

That Phoebe engages in such nostalgia is of course reminiscent of Jameson’s observations in his formative essay on postmodernism, and Phoebe’s relationship to Faith’s image can be thought of in the terms that Jameson wrote of the nostalgia film; both convey ““pastness” by the glossy qualities of the image” (1991a, 19). The novel is thus a deeply ambivalent one. Although by the end Wolf has apparently been set free from his tormented connection to the sixties, and Phoebe has historicized Faith’s death enough to attain her own measure of freedom, such operations remain unfinished, partly because the novel simultaneously registers problematic aspects to these too.

We may see in Phoebe's initial belatedness an encoding of Egan's own generation's historical position in relation to the 1960s, who were born too late to fully take part. Their sense of the decade's events is one of living in the aftermath. If for Stephen J. Burn one of the characteristics of an emerging post-postmodern novel is that it "explicitly looks back to, or dramatizes its roots within, postmodernism" (2008, 19), Egan does that by noting, along with Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden in their introduction to a special issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature* entitled "Postmodernism, Then," that postmodernism was in some ways an "extension" of "New Left politics" (294).²⁴ The revival of interest in temporality and history, then, seems to come from both these writers' feeling of missing crucial historical events the first time as well as growing up in a cultural climate that grew to distrust historical narratives. Furthermore, if these two elements conspire to give history a ghostly, incomplete character similar to that experienced by Phoebe, we may also attribute the attraction of the detective story to such uncertainty, insofar as the genre dramatizes the solidification of vague outlines and the establishment of firm historical causation, context and responsibility as a way of preventing obfuscations.²⁵ It does this by undertaking a repetition of actions and return to the ground of one's predecessors that sounds a lot like Kelly's "beginning with postmodernism." Similarly, the relation of the same-but-different that Todorov and Brooks bring to light in the detective story – and which I've noted is present in *The Invisible Circus* – resembles the way the post-boomer generation begin from a similar starting point in their depiction of a world marked by those characteristics often labelled postmodern. Kelly writes that these novelists append to that world a greater sense of historical situatedness that focuses less "on the rupture between past and present, as ... in much postmodern fiction, but rather on continuity, where the contemporary information society that characters inhabit is seen as emerging from identifiable historical and technological shifts over a long durée" (393). The operation that Kelly describes here, in which the appearance of the world remains the same but the reasons and perpetrators of that appearance are revealed, is much the same as in the detective novel. Indeed, one way of reading *The Invisible Circus*'s engagement with the genre is in terms of recent critical observations about an emerging post-postmodern aesthetics. If we've mentioned the renewed interest in history as a significant characteristic

²⁴ DeKoven makes a similar point when she notes that "postmodern American fiction ... is a crucial inheritor of sixties cultural and political movements" (270).

²⁵ We might also suggest that Egan's attraction to the detective story as an organizational structure for *The Invisible Circus* comes from its incorporation of belatedness. As Gertrude Stein noted of detective stories, they get "rid of the event before the book begins" (quoted by Marcus, 250), a narrative structure analogous not only to Faith's death but also to Phoebe (and Egan's) generational sense of belatedness with regards to the sixties.

of this new aesthetics, then in the case of Egan's novel we might want to add the epistemological emphasis of the detective novel to that list. As Laura Marcus writes,

the correlation made by a number of recent critics between 'modernism' and 'epistemology' ... leads to a connection being drawn between modernist literature and the detective genre. Postmodernist literature, and postmodernist detective or 'anti-detective' fiction in particular, are then placed on the side of a 'negative hermeneutics' (in which the quest for knowledge is doomed to failure) and/or the realms of 'ontology', in which the focus is not on the problematics of knowledge (as in the epistemological field) but on world-making (246)

Although Marcus makes a note of caution when reminding us that Brian McHale's distinctions are "very general" (246), it is in this regard that *The Invisible Circus* offers some interesting reflections. Unlike Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, for instance, which is confident of the impossibility of attaining any sort of confirmed knowledge in the form of a postmodern detective – or "anti-detective" – story, Egan's novel retains more faith in the investigatory technique. Phoebe's realization towards the end of the novel that only she – only the detective – could have extracted from Wolf the truth about Faith's death suggests Egan's own faith in the detective's power, and thus in our ability to know, as does the fact that in gaining knowledge about her sister's death, Phoebe gains a degree of comfort and closure. From this vantage point, the novel doesn't seem to conform to Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney's definition of the postmodern detective story which "parodies or subverts" this confidence in acquiring knowledge (quoted by Marcus, 254). Nevertheless, as we have seen, *The Invisible Circus* does exhibit similarities with such postmodern treatments insofar as it asks "questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot" (Merivale and Sweeney quoted by Marcus, 254). One might suggest that this reveals nothing more than the over-prescribed nature of such definitions – and of such distinctions between modernism and postmodernism – although I think in this case it is indicative of something further. Because if *The Invisible Circus* does ask questions about mysteries of knowing which transcend the mystery plot itself, then those questions are implicitly occasioned by and focused on postmodernism itself, interrogating its ambivalence about the possibility of historical knowledge and exploring the effect of such uncertainty. With this in mind, I suggest that part of the significance of Egan's utilization of the detective story is that genre's incorporation of a dynamic play between historicization, myth, and anticipation.

Yet the way the novel reveals Wolf's ulterior motive suggests that drives towards historicization also come with embedded insufficiencies and perils. If Marxists like Jameson emphasize the benefit of historicization in terms of analysing objective reality, Wolf's version risks dressing up a complacent acceptance of a post-sixties consensus on utopian thinking – Marianne DeKoven speaks of the aftermath of the sixties as “post-utopian” (xvi) and of “the defeat and repudiation of utopia in the wake of the sixties” (24) – as a more noble Niebuhrian humility. Likewise, although Egan rejects the postmodern anti-detective novel's suspicion of final, singular meaning, the novel in fact doesn't wholly subscribe to a Holmesian confidence in the investigatory method, nor a Jamesonian objective historicism, which is testament to the lingering influence of postmodern attitudes towards history. In attempting to steer clear of both relativism and dogmatism, Egan suggests that Wolf's echo of Niebuhr's humility is an attractive third option. Indeed the best description of the novel's – and especially Wolf's – ideal of history comes from Niebuhr, who wrote that “one must admit the subjective element in historical judgments, but also insist upon the distinction between purely arbitrary judgments and those which throw real light upon the variegated events of history” (151-2). Yet if this *is* ultimately Wolf's conclusion, then its humility not only sheds light on the literary-historical developments of a post-postmodernism but also finds the root of such developments precisely in conceptions of the temporal and historical structure of the events of the 1960s. *The Invisible Circus* remains uncomfortable with the various conceptions of history it incorporates. Wolf offers a reading of the New Left that blames illusions of historical mastery and self-congratulation about its own historical significance for the deformation of its utopianism into a flattening of historical possibility collusive with postmodernism. As a corrective, he urges a historicization tinged with Niebuhrian realism and humility. Phoebe begins the novel convinced of the accuracy of myths of the New Left, at least insofar as they shape her image of Faith. Yet the approach Wolf advocates as an alternative to myth is compromised by his individualized ulterior motive, one which appears to confirm an irreducibly subjective element to historical accounts. That Wolf seems to adopt the Niebuhrian attitude suggests that at some level he recognizes and acknowledges this. DeKoven speaks of “a postmodern skepticism about utopia as well as regret for its defeat” (273). While I am interested in the extent to which the dialectic this forms can be thought of as “post-postmodern,” if both Wolf's and Phoebe's experiences ultimately point toward Niebuhrian realism, this can be only a partial solution for those like Phoebe, who experience a “charge of excitement” when thinking about “[p]eople her own age changing

the world by force” (232), or Wolf, who, despite his enumeration of failures, retains the nostalgic sense that “[w]e were after something ... We truly were. In a way that’s hard to admit, it sounds foolish now but it didn’t then, that’s the difference. Hundreds and thousands of us, all reaching. It’s a powerful thing, that many people believing in something at once” (226).

Is It Time Yet?:

Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document*

Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document* (2006) shuttles between an ensemble of interconnected characters in temporal periods that form the titles of eight of its nine sections: "1972" (1); "Summer 1998" (19); "1972-1973" (93); "Fall and Winter 1998" (121); "1973-1980" (165); "Spring 1999" (203); "1982-1999" (219); "2000" (235); part nine (269) is untitled. By structuring her novel in this way, Spiotta brings to the fore questions concerning the relationship of the past to the present. She is interested in the "personal history" that Stephen J. Burn has claimed is a particular fascination of the post-postmodern novel, as well as the way in which "things that happen to you in the past make a difference to who you are in the present." Rather than forming this in terms of what Burn calls "genetic inheritance" (25), however, she is more preoccupied with examining how individual and personal changes interact with the mutation and development of political and cultural ideas. In *Eat the Document*, this is manifested in a variety of changing states and in an interest in how things – people, ideas, places – can be one thing and another, both successively and simultaneously. It is seen in Mary Whittaker becoming Freya when she joins a radical left-wing group, then Caroline when she becomes a fugitive from the FBI and then Louise when, still on the run, she marries and has a child. It is seen in her lover Bobby Desoto's change to Nash Davis, the manager of a radical bookstore in 1990s Seattle; in how Josh, a teenage frequenter of the store, can start off a hacker of corporate websites and end up committed to and working for corporate capitalism; in how a piece of land can be a Christian socialist commune in the nineteenth century, a feminist commune in the 1970s, and a corporate planned community at the turn of the millennium; and in how Emma Goldman can be a "cool accessory" in a mall and "still Emma Goldman" (258). What shapes *Eat the Document*, then, is Spiotta's fascination with the process of change, both individual and historical. Like Jennifer Egan in *The Invisible Circus*, in the interconnected narratives of these characters and historical periods Spiotta introduces a variety of conceptions, theories and understandings of change: the relationship between abrupt and gradual change; anticipation of the future as a place where fragmented experience can be unified in a narrative; the implications of the proliferation of the meaning or signification of a particular concept, idea or place; and theories of co-optation. While the book is conspicuous in its attention to the relationship between the past and the present, the second

of these – the anticipation of the future – orients the book ultimately toward a future in which a clearer and more total explanation of the relationship between the 1960s and 1990s – the governing interest of the novel – will be possible. Spiotta firstly uses Mary’s experience of going underground to establish the particular contours of a fear that arises from the wait for such an explanation – the possibility that in the intervening time, alternative narratives (be they active distortions or simply stories told from a different perspectives) will spring up to ‘explain’ events. She then characterizes these distortions and how they can be problematic. The novel ends with another instance of anticipation, undertaken by Mary’s son Jason, which has the simultaneous effect of projecting the reader forward into a future the novel refuses to show us and returning us to Mary’s original moment of anticipation. That *Eat the Document* refrains from making manifest this future in which an explanation will be possible ensures that it is a novel poised – or perhaps stuck – between explanations of the past and hopes for the future.

1. Mary: Transition and Anticipation

When Mary Whittaker,²⁶ a young woman involved in a radical group similar to the Weathermen, goes underground after their bombing kills a housekeeper, she describes it as “the undoing of [her] life” (3). She lists those things that are taken away by going into hiding: “take away, first of all, your people. Your family. Your lover ... Then put yourself somewhere unfamiliar, where ... you are a complete unknown. Where you possess nothing ... [T]hen ... take away your history, every last bit of it” (3). She talks about this experience as if it were abrupt or “easy,” and if these successive diminishments leave Mary feeling like she has “nothing” (3), Spiotta makes clear that Mary’s intensity of feeling doesn’t necessarily entail accuracy. In fact, Mary’s life as Mary does not end immediately but continues to influence the construction of her new identity.

Firstly, Mary’s musical tastes inspire her choice of new name and new hometown; she names herself Caroline after the Beach Boys song “Caroline No” (a song of change and lost identity) and gives her hometown as Hawthorne, California because it is the band’s hometown. Although Bobby, her lover and fellow radical, counselled against providing a readable trail – “if it is legible to you, then it gives you away” (9) – Mary finds that the

²⁶ Throughout the novel Mary changes her name. For continuity’s sake, and for clarity, I will call her Mary throughout.

undoing of a life is perhaps not as easy as she first experienced it. If Bobby's order is tactically reasonable, it is nonetheless difficult to put into practice. As Mary puts it, "everything, of course, means something" (9). Instead of an abrupt recalibration of her identity, Mary's transition to becoming Caroline involves resisting the built-up store of her original identity in a way that doesn't ignore the necessary usefulness that identity provides, while simultaneously dissolving into Caroline (without an identifiable link between them) those steadfast parts of her old identity which she can't change. Large parts of her past need to be erased, because they give her away, but other, smaller parts are useful, and provide the building blocks for her future; still other parts, while dangerous in her new life, refuse to be erased, and thus need to be incorporated into her new life in a way that doesn't mark them as aspects of her past one.

In this process, habit must be resisted, though not to the extent that all habits are simply reversed in the new life. This is not an immediately easy thing to do because in her process of creating Caroline, Mary comes to realize that "her identity was more habit and will than anything more intrinsic" (10). Mary, in other words, has time on her side; Caroline has none. And while Mary keeps a gift of a watch her parents gave her (11), suggesting that she will need time to adapt to her new identity, every facet of this new self requires the active questioning of unquestioned habit, down to the minutest and least important things, like her beverage preferences: "for a while it would be impossible not to be confused and self-conscious during even the most mundane exchanges. Do you drink coffee? And she would have to think, Well I always have, but now, well, maybe I don't" (10). On this occasion she makes that simple reversal, deciding she "never touch[es] the stuff" (10), but in other situations she acknowledges that certain parts of her past life are necessary in her passage to a new one. The few possessions she brings with her from her life as Freya and as Mary, for instance, she notes are "her whole life, the sum of her past twenty-two years and the path into her future" (11). They are "supplies" (10) for the new life, bought in anticipatory preparation. Yet while superficial changes are easy to enact with the help of hair dye and scissors, they serve to isolate and bring to the fore those characteristics which she can't change. Cutting her hair and changing its colour fail to erase "the same whispery, alone person she had been her whole life" (17). In addition to these un-erasable, intensely specific qualities, Mary discovers that identity is constructed not just from one's own actions and emotions but also from one's relationship to others, and that changing herself means changing them too. Noting down her new self's invented family, "[s]he felt

superstitious about writing [that she has no sibling or parents]. As if it would curse her poor parents somehow, or undo her younger sister” (16).

If these are all aspects of the way Mary’s identity influences Caroline’s, of the way the past irreducibly influences the present, then Spiotta suggests that the reverse can also be true. Mary’s creation of Caroline begins to threaten Mary’s own history as her new, present identity begins to suggest that her past should be different, since constructing Caroline involves inventing “[w]here Caroline Sherman had spent every year of her twenty-two years” (18). If Caroline’s age is necessarily also Mary’s (the imagining of a life before her actual life is too much of a leap), then equally Caroline cannot appear in the world aged twenty-two in a motel in the middle of the country, but must have a past, too. If Mary is Caroline *now*, then she must also necessarily *have been* Caroline *then*. Yet if, as we saw, some parts of Mary are un-erasable, that past becomes a patchwork knitted together from unacknowledged parts of Mary’s past and almost over-acknowledged parts of Caroline’s invented history. Mary’s shedding of herself and donning of Caroline is always incomplete; she is always partly one and partly another, a “pallid suggestion of a person” (17) for whom “no experience [is] ever one hundred percent what it [is]. There [is] always this extra thing” (274).

This in-between and incomplete state inspires in Mary desires of unity and wholeness which manifest themselves in anticipations of a future in which such desires are fulfilled. This begins immediately after the bombing, on the train escaping the scene, where “she waited for someone to come over to her, finger-pointing” (4). In the motel, she is unable to shower because she is “certain that was how [the FBI capturing her] would happen, she could visualize it happening. She saw it in slow motion, she saw it silently, and then she saw it quickly, in double time” (4). Her choice of Caroline as a name and Hawthorne as a hometown are laced with the secret admission that “she wanted it somehow, however quietly, to be legible and coherent ... she wanted someone, at some time, to figure it out” (9). For much of the novel Mary alternates between a realistic appraisal of the likelihood of her capture, “when consecutive events could not help but be traced, ruminated upon, dwelt upon, all leading to her” (191), and the fear that this long dreamt-of future will arrive too late and “she would have lived her new life so long that the conjuring of the old life would seem like a dream, an act of imagination” (10) in which “she wouldn’t even know what was true and what she had made up ... Someday time would turn the lies into history” (97). Time is the enemy here because it is the repetition of acts through time which are the basis

of identity.²⁷ It is time that will allow Mary's repetitions of her lies about herself to accumulate into the contours of a self (in much the same way she realized her habits as Mary had done so) and obscure her "*original*" self completely (5, Spiotta's emphasis). When she "imagine[s that] in future years there would be time to go over the series of events that led to the one event that inevitably led to the motel room" (14) she means that the desired future will have arrived 'in time' for those repetitions not to have overwritten Mary entirely. But, as Adam Kelly has observed, "Mary's selfconsciousness about the narrative quality of her predicament is highlighted" (2010, 200) at this point: her successive identities – "where Mary became Freya became Caroline" (*ETD*, 14) – refuse, at least at this particular moment, to be incorporated into a narrative that will link "the series of events" in a way that Mary characterizes as "a whoosh of history" (14); she pins her hopes for this incorporation on the future. This future, as we will see, is always a future 'to come'; even, when pregnant with Jason, she feels a "twisted optimism" because preparing for his birth "included a future, which was something she hadn't seen before" (231), and even yet when Jason, as a teenager, figures out his mother's true past and offers her the chance for explanation, the moment for that narrative still doesn't come: "She tried to think of what to say next. But she couldn't speak" (274).²⁸

At stake in Mary's story is the ability to say, as Burn does, that what happens in the past affects who one is in the present. To assert that is, as Kelly's observation helps us realize, to use narrative to link together those temporal periods. That Mary's experience is fragmented and often threatens the very possibility of narrative sequence, as seen in the way her creation of Caroline threatens to overwrite her life as Mary, is one iteration in the novel of the problems that arise when the past and present become difficult to reconcile. Mary's fear that the lies would turn into history is a fear of narrative distortion, and once Spiotta has established it as a threat, she uses a large part of *Eat the Document* to chart the distortions that can be wrought by different approaches to registering the process of change.

²⁷ In this sense, Mary experiences identity in a similar way to that in which Judith Butler described gender, as "tenuously constituted in time ... through a ... repetition of acts" (179).

²⁸ The distinction between the future that does come – the reasonable likelihood that Jason, or somebody else, will figure out her identity – and the one that remains 'to come' – her ability to propose an adequate narrative – could perhaps be thought of in terms of Derrida's future and *l'avenir*. As he puts it in the film *Derrida* (2002): "The future is that which – tomorrow, later, next century – will be. There's a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, *l'avenir* (to come) which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable." Although in Mary's case this latter future is not one in which an individual appears or arrives, she is hoping for a similarly kairotic future of the opportune moment in which her narrative will become available.

2. Paradox

Spiotta uses Henry's story to explore one man's reaction to the paradoxical nature of his past and present. Henry, who bankrolls Nash's bookstore, suffers from insomnia and vivid waking dreams in which he is in Vietnam, "spraying Agent Orange all over jungles and riverbanks" (162), and explains that he started suffering from the symptoms of dioxin exposure (a toxin found in napalm) "a few years after the war ended" (163). The dreams are a more recent development which have resulted in him being diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and prescribed an antianxiety drug named Nepenthex. Yet as he tells Nash, to whom this seems like a consistent if regrettable result of fighting in the Vietnam War, Henry was never in Vietnam, excused after deliberately failing a hearing test. Henry eventually dies from a cancer associated with exposure to dioxin. After his death, a study links the Nepenthex with Henry's cancer, which Nash takes to be confirmation of a rational explanation – that Henry contracted the cancer from taking the antianxiety drug – but this doesn't explain why he displayed effects of dioxin exposure in the first place, or why he had the dreams, the combination of which led to the prescription of Nepenthex.

The expected chain of cause and effect is reversed here inasmuch as Henry's present suffering suggests he was in a country he has never visited. If we saw in the previous chapter that Derrida's and Currie's work helps us understand the complicated temporal logic of the archive, how the possibility of a future memory will influence and even dictate behaviour in the present, here we seem to encounter a strange variation of Derrida's logic of supplementarity, which Currie describes as a way of understanding "the supplement as a possibility which produces that to which it is said to be added on" (2007, 43). Here, the supplement appears to be generative of a new past. If we'd conventionally understand an occurrence like Henry's illness as a result of his experience in Vietnam, *Eat the Document* forces us to consider the possibility that he did indeed fight there. This is not the same as the common experience of developments in the present colouring what happened in the past, because the two events – not fighting in Vietnam, contracting a disease associated with presence in Vietnam – are mutually exclusive. It is not a question of the deepening of contextual information about the past that may influence our view of it.

Henry's response to this troubling situation is to construct a narrative which both reconstitutes a causal chain and makes meaning out of it. Firstly, he remains adamant that

he “got sick due to dioxin exposure from Agent Orange. This is the truth, Nash, and you will have to work your mind around it. This is how my life makes sense. This is how my life signifies something” (264). He then connects the two contradictory elements of his life together through guilt, admitting that he feels ashamed for faking the test that exempted him from being drafted. As he puts it, “I knew all about that war, and I never did a thing to stop it. I made sure my ass was safe, and then I drank my way through those years. And I knew it was wrong. I didn’t do anything. And ever since I have paid and paid” (163). If there is an irony to Henry’s story, it comes in his contraction of the disease he ‘*should have*’ got; if he’d gone to Vietnam, at least he would have saved himself the guilt. Yet it is precisely through what he sees as moral failure that Henry makes sense of his life. For him it isn’t much of an irony but rather a perfectly sensible punishment for such ethical abdication. In fact he envies those whose lives have been ruined by an ethical choice followed through, like Nash, to whom on his deathbed Henry says “I know you tried to take a full swing at it. That’s not shameful. I’m glad for you” (264). In other words, Henry understands the logic of complementarity as able to correct past wrongs by effecting a rebalancing of historical cause and effect. His illness is not the irreconcilable paradox it might otherwise be understood to be but the physical manifestation of moral and ethical failure; not the result of actions undertaken but of those *not* undertaken that *should have been*. If the logic of complementarity produces that to which it is said to be added on, Henry’s illness doesn’t so much produce that reality as *make up* for it; it produces a supplement that fits the past that should have been. If his dreams and memories are “proxy,” they are also “real” (163) because they explain the truth better than the confused relation between cause and effect his lack of involvement in Vietnam and his medical diagnosis seem to offer.

Nevertheless, while Henry’s explanation is perhaps understandable on an individual psychological level, it remains troubling – to say the least – on a temporal one. We might here make the observation that the temporality of medical diagnosis is much like the detective’s work in piecing together a crime: both the investigator and the doctor start with an incontrovertible fact, the former (remembering Todorov) with the dead body, the latter with the exhibition of particular symptoms. From there, both work backwards in order to explain and contextualize (or historicize) these facts. Thus the temporality of diagnosis might be said to run like this: exhibition of symptoms → connection of symptoms with disease → disease diagnosed → cause attributed. Henry’s however, runs like this: exhibition of symptoms → connection of symptoms with disease → disease diagnosed →

no cause attributable. In refusing a temporal logic compatible with Henry's moral logic, the novel also refuses to endorse Henry's solution, which deals with the causal contradictions by diminishing causality and elevating moral significance. Spiotta is more cautious; she depicts Henry's narrative as a reasonable response to the situation he finds himself in, but suggests that Henry is aware that it is a necessary falsity when he stresses to Nash "I want you to think about it the way I'm telling you to" (264). For someone like Mary, whose continued existence is premised on a believable falsity, a narrative explanation like Henry's is insufficient, even dangerous. Equally so is the way time affords a range of different possible explanations to arise; these are the focus of the next section.

3. Proliferation

In the sections of *Eat the Document* set in the 1990s, notions of resistance and co-optation are understood through comparison and contrast with similar notions in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet if what it means to resist and subvert, and what it means to be co-opted into the mainstream, can change over time, those meanings can also multiply so that something like the underground life of the fugitive can retain its power of 'otherness' while at the same time its language and its phenomenological dynamic – the disconnection between a public appearance and a private reality – can become generalized into mainstream American life as a defining characteristic of suburbia. So if, in the early 1970s, the underground life seems the only but entirely lamentable option for radicals like Mary and Bobby, the result of conscious political decisions and commitments stemming from their conception of their struggle as one against the entirety of American cultural and political power, in the 1990s suburban life is celebrated by its residents for its ability to generalize this underground life, for the way it fosters secret lives under the cover of an intense and accepted version of normality.²⁹ This characteristic of suburbia is both exploited and embodied by Josh, whose "normalcy was so extreme as to be perverse" (146) and whose "house was the highest realization of suburban splendor" (153). Miranda finds this exhilarating: "Here he was, in a development of three-car garages, cathedral ceilings and fifteen rooms, here he was with his two hundred e-mails and his clinically precise manipulations, already in possession of a genuine secret life" (154). Miranda is fascinated by this because she considers the "three-car garages, cathedral ceilings and fifteen rooms" and Josh's hacking activity as belonging

²⁹ This is dramatized in the film *American Beauty* (1999), where 'normality' and 'perversity' are intertwined: Chris Cooper's army colonel exaggerates his homophobia to obscure his own homosexuality, which revolts him; Annette Bening's real-estate developer hides her unhappiness under a bluster of entrepreneurship; and Mena Suvari's Angela hides her sexual inexperience behind an image of blasé promiscuity.

to entirely different worlds and their simultaneous presence in Josh appears to endow his life with a double-ness the (presumably secret) knowledge of which on Miranda's part provides a certain frisson of excitement. Her use of the word "genuine" suggests both that such a life has a certain cultural currency (which we will see more clearly when we turn our attention to Jason and his friend Gage's record collecting) and that such genuineness can in some way be measured against an originary authenticity the novel leads us to believe – through Miranda's infatuation with the contents of the radical bookstore Prairie Fire – dwells in the kinds of underground lives those radicals of the sixties and seventies – like Mary and Nash – were forced to live. It is true, at least, that Miranda's conferral of authenticity on Josh's secret life is based on his apparent negotiation of the same dynamic as that of the earlier generation: a distinction between outward appearance and inner reality while simultaneously insisting – silently, through the absolute believability of that outward appearance – on the complete absence of just such a distinction. It is also true that Josh describes his life in language that sounds like that of the fugitive: "lesson number one. You control what people believe to be true about you. All of it is subject to manipulation. You can avoid interference very easily. Most people are quite shallow about their judgments" (153-4). Yet the dynamic at play here is not that his outward appearance bespeaks someone "destined for full-steamed establishment success" (146) while his hacking activities repeatedly take down establishment websites. After all, Josh has not had to move anywhere or assume a different identity in order to live his double life. Rather the point is that in suburbia, individuals engaging in truly subversive and illegal acts look no different from those who aren't; suburbia allows the subversive to hide in plain sight.

Mary's fifteen-year-old son Jason suggests this was an animating principle behind suburban design. Meeting a fellow music obsessive, forty-year-old Gage, who has moved back in with his suburban parents, Jason remarks how

we both sneered together at the idea of suburbia, but who are we kidding? We exist because of suburbia. Suburbia is a freak's dreamworld, a world of extra rooms upstairs and long, lazy afternoons with no interference. A place where you can listen to LPs for hours on end. You can live in your room, your own rent-free corner of the universe, and create a world of pleasure and interest entirely centered on yourself and your interior aesthetic and logic. Suburbia is where you can pursue your individuality, no matter how rancid or recondite: the big generic-development mansions and three-

car garages can harbor endless eccentricities. In your room and out of earshot.
Sometimes [in] an entire furnished basement (73-4)

Jason's use of the resonant sixties appellation "freak" to describe the kind of person for whom suburbia is a "dreamworld" suggests that the rightful environment for 1990s incarnations of 1960s counterculturalists is right here in suburbia.³⁰ Jason, like Josh, talks of the freedom from "interference," and speaks of this dreamworld as one of "extra rooms" and "rent-free corner[s]" where one can burrow into a "rancid" darkness in a "basement" that is a "harbor" for secrecy. This association between secrecy and suburbia is present throughout the section of Jason's journal from which the above quotation is taken: he talks of being someone "who feels comfortable in my isolation" (76) and of being "suited to low-ceilinged, small, rabbit-warren-type rooms ... need[ing] corners and shadows" (77); he prefers to read "true crime stories ... the real dark ones" (78). In this atmosphere, his mother tells a story about meeting Dennis Wilson in a "scummy bar" (86) in California in 1980; it is this story that first makes Jason suspicious about the "eleven years [between her claimed graduation in 1972 and having him, Jason, in 1983] I know nothing about" (88). These years, we find out, are the ones in which Mary cements her identity as Louise and in which she moves to suburbia. In a chapter entitled "Revolutionary Acts" and whose first sentence describes her move, with Augie, Jason's father, into "*deepest* middle-class suburbia" (230, my emphasis), Mary describes how it was here that she "at last [felt] a distance from smudgy mimeographed broadsides, leaky faucets, and windows that didn't stay open unless you propped sticks under them" (230). After years of hiding, she feels safest in plain sight, in the "skylighted, pachysandra-edged comfort" of suburbia (230). If Mary's new-found security comes from suburbia's acceptance of its individual inhabitants' hoarding of secrets, in its incorporation of that acceptance into its rituals of behaviour and even into its physical design, Spiotta seems to see in this a generalization of the underground life in which the repercussions of extraordinary political actions and decisions meld seamlessly with everyday American life.

The way *Eat the Document* extends its exploration of secrecy into Jason and Gage's cultural pursuits illustrates some of the effects of this generalization. Unbeknownst to him, Jason's obsession with the Beach Boys echoes his mother's own before she went underground. However neither Jason nor Gage really interact with the music as a historical

³⁰ This is equally true of the committed revolutionary forced to go underground and the more laissez-faire hippie, content now to listen to the Beach Boys and Love (like Jason does) in their "corner of the universe."

artefact, but rather as a pure one stripped of any historical context or existence. Jason and Gage's experience of music occurs in what Miranda later in the novel describes as the "confused context [which] is the essence of alienation" (258); music's historicity – its political, cultural and social environment – is removed through a combination of the fetishization of the purely aesthetic experience of the music (when we first meet Jason, he is listening to "ten versions of the same song in a row" [21]), of the way that music is exchanged among collectors and bootleggers, and of the cultural capital – the same currency Josh's secret life deals in – gained from such exchange. This is not uncommon in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but what is interesting here is that the sense of music's historical and political situatedness is displaced into the distribution and acquirement of the physical object through an underground communications network of fellow obsessives. In other words, while the singularity of the music itself is abstracted away from specific contexts, its substantiation in physical form is enhanced in the process of exchange itself. Thus acquiring music becomes a process of unearthing 'real' artefacts, one which is described in much the same language as that used when tracing a fugitive: "A new master unearthed, a track unnoticed at the end of a long silence on a master tape. In a safety deposit box, in a basement. Someone didn't notice it!" (72). The shop Josh and Miranda look round later in the novel – called Suburban Guerilla, no less – sells "*underground* twelve-inch dance records" (255, my emphasis). In terms of art, the underground life has become a facet of the mainstream market, even if its products are given a subcultural frisson through internet forums, collectors fairs, and the production of bootleg recordings which are only possible through the concealment of secret recording devices (much like the surveillance technology of law enforcement agencies). Spiotta's problem with this is crystallized in that same scene in Suburban Guerilla, where Josh, now fully in love with "the purity of capitalism," asks Miranda, in capitalist-literalist mode: "what's wrong with Emma Goldman being sold at the mall as a cool accessory? It is still Emma Goldman, isn't it?" (258) For Spiotta the answer is both yes and no: something of the 'real' Goldman remains despite this farcical re-appropriation, but that is not to say that such alterations do not have a crushing effect on the historical memory of Goldman. In this case, and in that of suburbia, Spiotta seems to suggest that the effect of these changes is to introduce doubt where previously there was certainty. So, if Mary's underground life is the result of a specific political commitment to the truth, the generalization of that life's contours in suburbia begins not only to question the particular content of Mary's commitment but, because it is generalizable at all, begins also to doubt one's ability to judge the truth of one thing over the falsity of another; if the underground life is the result

of political commitment but also just a way of life for millions of people, how can the justness – or otherwise – of Mary’s actions be judged? Similarly with Emma Goldman, who becomes less a historical figure associated with a particular political commitment but rather a shorthand image for the vaguely ‘rebellious’ or ‘countercultural’. As a music executive in Spiotta’s novel *Stone Arabia* (2011) tells Nik Worth, a musician: “You can have it both ways ... If you want to be successful, you have to get things to work in many, many ways to many, many people” (171). Spiotta’s simultaneous acknowledgement of the detrimental effects of this process and retention of an un-co-optable core at the heart of Mary’s experience (and, presumably, Emma Goldman’s) takes the form of an attitude that marks *Eat the Document*, and we will see it resurface in our discussion of the contrasting secret lives of Nash and Josh later on in this chapter. But with Suburban Guerilla’s re-appropriative tactics, and in its name itself, we are touching on the subject of co-optation, which will be the focus of the next section.

4. Co-optation

Henry comes to understand his life in relation to a corporate conglomerate called Allegecom. In the years leading up to his death, he spends his nights defacing billboards advertising its activities, which include “everything from pharmaceuticals (through its offshoot Pherotek) to genetically modifying seeds with coordinated, matching pesticides (through its biotech arm, Versagro)” (157). These two arms in particular would appear to impact on Henry’s life: Pherotek is probably responsible for Nepenthex, while it seems likely that it was through the Versagro arm that Allegecom developed dioxin, which is used in pesticides as much as in weapons. His night-time defacings partly mitigate his illness and afford him a certain amount of agency with regards to the company he identifies as responsible for the later events of his life. As he puts it, Allegecom “make the antidepressant that was prescribed for me specifically for the depression that I have due to dioxin and combat trauma. It was actually designed to treat combat stress trauma, which they caused in the first place” (206). As Michael Szalay writes in a piece on Spiotta for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Henry has “been exposed to dioxin, in effect, as a consumer. A vehicle for consumption, Henry’s body is eaten away from the inside by the needs that Allegecom places there” (2012b).

Spiotta is interested in the role corporate capitalism plays in the process of change and the relationship between past and present, from the multinational companies bombed by Mary

and Bobby's group in the 1960s to those targeted by the would-be rebels who gather at Nash's bookstore in the 1990s. The part these kinds of companies play in influencing cultural and political change is focused through the character of Josh, who successfully pitches to Allegecom a "totally intentional community designed ... for franchising and profit" (237) situated on a piece of land in New Harmon, New York that "has a history of alternative community. In the nineteenth century it had a community of Christian socialists. In the early '70s it was a women-only commune" (238). For Josh, this is not a contradiction but a boon; in fact he suggests that the imperatives of the left-wing communes and his planned community "are not all that different," claiming that a "corporation is merely a commune with different values" (238). Rather than erasing the land's radical history, Josh's presentation seeks to draw as much attention as it can to it in order to place his own community in a tradition and lineage it does not belong in. By so doing, he (remembering Miranda's words) confuses the context in which both prior communes and the present community are considered. As Josh himself puts it,

like a commune, everything [in his community] is organized around a collusion of interests ... A corporation has rights and privileges that are distinct from its individual owners', just as a commune has collective interests that supersede each individual's interests. (238)

Just as he aims to "eliminate personal responsibility" by "allow[ing] groups of people to act in concert but without consequence" (238), Josh aims to eradicate the particularity of the personal and individual through a process of abstraction he dresses up as the practice of a "communard" (238). His presentation insinuates the alienation of capitalist abstraction into the collective ethos of left-wing politics. Such stealth tactics have been analyzed under the rubric of what Thomas Frank, in his book *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, calls "the co-optation theory" (7). Frank's book is a critique of this theory which claims to formulize the practice of co-optation into a conception of historical change. He summarizes it as "faith in the revolutionary potential of "authentic" counterculture combined with the notion that business mimics and mass-produces fake counterculture in order to cash in on a particular demographic and to subvert the great threat that "real" counterculture represents" (7). Frank, who along with the other writers associated with his magazine *The Baffler* charted

the interweaving of corporate interests and countercultural attitude throughout the 1990s,³¹ aims in *The Conquest of Cool* to show the deficiencies of this kind of historiography, which creates a “standard binary narrative” (15) that sees radical countercultures and corporate business as diametrically opposed enemies. His book goes on to show how on the one hand “the relics of the counterculture reek of affectation and phoniness” (8) while on the other elements of the business world saw the sixties counterculture as “a symbolically in their own struggles against the mountains of dead-weight procedure and hierarchy that had accumulated over the years” (9).³² Frank’s critique ultimately rests on what we might call the simplicity of the co-optation theory’s syntagmatic sequentiality, which rests on a ‘this, then this’ narrative that in turn relies on a zero-sum choice being made between two alternatives.

At times, Spiotta risks implying that she views the relationship between the 1960s and 1990s in terms of co-optation (Josh’s remark that Allegecom’s community “will be the corporate village that will make money on the desire to escape corporate hegemony” [239] echoes Frank’s description of hip consumerism as the vehicle by which “disgust with consumerism [is turned] into the very fuel by which consumerism might be accelerated” [119]) but she just manages to steer clear of asserting its accuracy by conceiving of it less as a mode of enquiry undertaken by historians and more as an issue current in the late-’90s world of the novel itself, one the teenagers who frequent Prairie Fire are aware of. In the culture surrounding the radical bookstore, the confusion of signification present in theories of co-optation – how one behaviour or image can signal more than one political or cultural position – is connected by both Spiotta herself and her characters with a wider postmodern culture concerned with appropriation and recontextualization. It is present, for example, in Josh’s description of his hacking operation: “The best kind of hijack is to create an alternative site that looks and behaves just like the real site” (146). It is also found in the preponderance of “fierce chick zines that claimed to be überfeminist but sounded like S & M porno magazines” (254-5) and the groups that meet at Prairie Fire who have names like

³¹ See the two collections of *Baffler* essays published as *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1997) and *Boob Jubilee: The Cultural Politics of the New Economy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2003).

³² He continues: “[i]n the late 1950s and early 1960s, leaders of the advertising and menswear businesses developed a critique of their own industries, of over-organization and creative dullness, that had much in common with the critique of mass society which gave rise to the counterculture. Like the young insurgents, people in more advanced reaches of the American corporate world deplored conformity, distrusted routine, and encouraged resistance to established power. They welcomed the youth-led cultural revolution not because they were secretly planning to subvert it or even because they believed it would allow them to tap a gigantic youth market (although this was, of course, a factor), but because they perceived in it a comrade in their own struggles to revitalize American business and the consumer order generally” (9).

the “Barcode Remixers” and the “Radical Juxtaposeurs” (130), or the ““K” Nation” who “merely insert the letter *k* or remove ... the letter *k* – dislokations [are] what they call ... them – to cause psychic discomfort and disturbances” (62). Other actions involve altering labels on Nike shirts to “[m]ake [them] look exactly like a Nike label but instead of saying one hundred percent cotton, it says made from sixty percent Chinese prison labor, forty percent child labor” (42). Henry, in his defacements of Allegecom’s billboards, feels the need to distinguish his activities from the rebellious stance *du jour*: “It wasn’t an appropriation. A displacement. An edit. A postmodern modification or improvement. A *détournement*. None of that. It was just his get-gone will” (91).

If Frank shows how the business and advertising industries responded to the counterculture far more positively than the co-optation theory allows for, Spiotta indicates that Josh’s switch from subversive hacker to Allegecom star is less of an ideological about-face than it might appear. This is a world in which binary constructions of politics and culture have no currency; the 1990s is no place for the old sixties slogan “You’re either part of the solution or part of the problem,” even as the novel focuses on two members of the sixties generation in Mary and Nash whose lives have been marked by their commitment to just such a view of the world. The cue for the novel’s exploration of this comes when Miranda realizes that Nash organizes subversive groups at the store whose “actions [are] the discussion and planning of actions” (134) and accuses him of being a “para-activist ... not actually acting but running beside” (131). On the basic charge that Nash pretends to be an activist but when the time comes for action he never does anything, he appears guilty. When we first meet him he is in the midst of legitimizing inaction through the sophistic argument that such passivity is actually a truer form of activity. That such intellectual scaffolding is needed to legitimize an everyday occurrence – a teenager stealing a magazine from Prairie Fire – suggests that this attitude has become embedded both as a policy of the store and as part of Nash’s political outlook. The first sentence of the chapter in which we meet Nash suggests as much: “Nash had seen it happen before – many times, in fact” (25). This is confirmed on the next page: “Nash did nothing about this particular theft, or any other” (26). At first the novel suggests this is because he in some way sides with the shoplifter. After all, it is a \$15 magazine covered with a plastic wrap that prevents any potential buyers from flipping through it: “Could there exist a more appropriate or likely object for shoplifting?” (26). Nevertheless, we are also informed that Nash refuses to hide the more expensive books in the store behind the counter as a way of discouraging theft because “that created too much mystique for the stolen objects” (27), suggesting that

on some level he doesn't want people stealing from him, if only because he feels responsibility toward Henry who funds the store. He engages in a number of unsuccessful preventative measures such as writing notes asking people not to steal and hiring those who do, yet he rejects Henry's suggestion that he "just bust one of them" (29) and instead embarks on a justification of stealing on larger political grounds:

Nash would rather jeopardize the existence of the whole enterprise than bust this kid. Not because he didn't like confrontation but because he absolutely refused to be a cop of any kind. It really would be the last thing he would ever do. He was certain that the tiniest choices altered the world as significantly as larger choices. It was through accumulation that people gradually became unrecognizable to themselves. He would sacrifice a lot not to become an enforcer. (44)

In this respect it is important that after the theft Nash is confronted by Josh because he is the embodiment of the confused – and potentially co-opted – state of contemporary resistance. Josh's first remarks, summarizing the biography of the author of the book he is flipping through – "Revolutionist first, human afterwards" (45) – neatly encapsulate his own arc across the span of the novel. Though he begins it as a nominally subversive hacker of corporate websites, Josh ends up working for Allegecom not only because he admires the flexibility of capitalist ideology (though he does) but also for what he explicitly frames as basic human desires but which in fact exclude the human. In a conversation with Miranda late in the novel, he explains his decision to work for Allegecom thusly:

What it comes down to is I just don't want to look at other people's garbage my whole life. There is always garbage blowing around the street outside our apartment. Life is too short. All I want is a clean, quiet place ... If Allegecom contributes – as it most certainly does – to the world's degradation, undermining, at least in a global sense, order and peace, as well as multiplying garbage, and – let's face it – suffering, then it also mitigates, quite directly, my own contact with garbage and suffering. (260)

In the 2008 film *Examined Life*, on a walk through a waste disposal site, Slavoj Žižek remarks that this desire for the eradication of garbage is at the heart of the "conservative ideology" of ecology, which espouses a "mistrust of change" in its idealization of "nature as a harmonious, organic, balanced ... organism" (*Examined*). If Josh doesn't so much

mistrust change as attempt to flatten it and its possibility by reconfiguring radical histories into corporate antecedents, he invokes a sense of balance as a rationale for his personal ignorance of “the world’s degradation.” If this is a good example of the eradication of personal responsibility his projects at the corporation seek to achieve, and if as such it is a particularly ideological definition of the human in which individual pleasure (without a counterbalancing requirement for responsibility or acknowledgement of others) takes precedence over “the world’s degradation,” then the implicit message of his desire for “a clean quiet place” is one in which humans are not present. Not wanting “to look at other people’s garbage” carries with it the underlying desire not to want to look at the “other people” themselves.

The fact that Josh can utter these words does much to create the context for Nash’s refusal to act, because for Josh, moving from hacking corporate websites to working for those same corporations is not a question of ethics but of enhancing his own individual pleasure; what motivates the switch is not an ideological reversal but simpler expediency. Yet that very bracketing of ethical concerns from a consideration of one’s individual pleasure is precisely an ethical act, something Josh partly acknowledges when he admits that his desire for cleanliness is at odds with the planet’s. Miranda, when she first meets Josh, looks at his mainstream appearance and thinks to herself “[t]hat was how it should be done ... Look and seem straight and law-abiding but actually do things to subvert the status quo” (147). But for this epitome of 1990s subversion, resistance – if it really exists in him at all – has nothing to do with a political commitment that conceives of communities and relationships. Consequently it can be dropped at any point. Josh’s admiration of capitalism’s flexibility – “You have to marvel at its elasticity, its lack of moral need, its honesty” (258) – may be a not-too-subtle piece of self-congratulation; he acts in two realms – the dominant space and the subversive space – and finds no contradiction in doing so; he too is flexibly elastic, and free of moral qualms. It is perhaps this range of available action – that within the space of a few months Josh can appear both a committed anti-capitalist pursuing specific political goals, and a proto-fascist for whom commitment and politics are bywords for anti-individualism – that inspires Nash’s rejection of action: not only do particular kinds of action implicate you in exploitative and destructive systems, *any* action does.

From this vantage point not acting acquires a resistant possibility it didn’t previously have. Yet in his past life as Bobby Desoto, Nash grappled with the same problem but came to a

very different conclusion. Mary remembers how their group wanted “tangible, unequivocal action” (188) but that she was initially more committed than Bobby, who found the demands of art countered those of effective political action: “When I am behind the camera, I feel a desire to understand and empathize. To undercut my own points. The truth is, that’s when it becomes interesting” (227). Mary responds with political expediency: “People are dying and can’t afford that kind of empathy for all sides” (227-8). She convinces Bobby to act: “do we want to leave action to the brutes of the world? This is the moment to decide. There are some inherent problems built into acting. It lacks perfection. But ... [i]t is a moral duty to do something, however imperfect” (228). If Bobby resolves this problem by committing fully to action, as Nash he tries to escape it by not identifying with its oppositional terms, instead finding another form of protest in the provision and upkeep of “a fairly interesting place: a sanctuary of subversion for misfits and scragglers” (35) in the form of Prairie Fire. Nevertheless, Mary’s demand returns in the form of Miranda’s accusation: is the provision of a shelter and retreat from a world one finds reprehensible an acceptable form of action? Miranda, for one, says no: “the world offered horrendous terms, a terrible, huge price was paid in actual suffering, and if you didn’t try to change that or mitigate that, your life was indefensible” (134).³³

This question is returned to in terms of aesthetics. Miranda suggests that Nash’s non-action finds expression in his preference for appearance over “the issues” (65), which she interprets as a resignation to losing the political fight. She dismisses Nash’s claim to “make persuasive and powerful the beauty of ... opposition” as “just a gesture”, something “[t]hat’s not really good enough” (65). Although Nash tries to defend his position by suggesting that aesthetics – in this case clothing – helps “remind ... you of who you want to be” (65), their conversation reveals that the underground life has become as much an aesthetic category for Nash – despite his practical investment in living it – as it has for the record-collectors Jason and Gage. What the reader may have guessed by this stage, but Miranda has not, is that Nash’s avowal of the importance of appearance is linked to his need to project a very specific image of himself in order to remain undetected by an FBI still searching for Bobby Desoto. If Miranda sees a disjunction between his claim that appearance and aesthetics “are the issues” – because “[t]hey are part of the tactics” and “[t]hey communicate” (65) – and the reality of his own appearance, which Nash himself

³³ Adam Kelly has noted how Miranda is “the novel’s spokesperson for the idealistic beliefs of the Sixties New Left” (2012b, 222) and in this context it is surely no accident that Miranda and Mary are similar names.

characterizes as “[l]ike a third-rate lab assistant [or] an off-duty security guard” (66), she doesn’t register the underlying logic of Nash’s argument, or read this as a near-confession of his real past. Similarly, when Miranda suggests that his clothing bespeaks anything except his radical beliefs, his “Exactly” (66) is met with little comment. For Nash, then, marshalling the relation between surface appearance and underlying reality is a political activity with a very pragmatic impetus. While this individual expediency might be read as undermining a more general case for appearance over reality, Nash’s privileging of appearance, for all its practical applications for him personally, distorts both his past and that of his group. As Mary finds when she becomes Caroline, one’s new identity begins to influence how one’s past is viewed. SAFE, the collective credited with Bobby Desoto’s avant-garde and political films and the group that carried out the bombing campaign, appears in the 1990s, though with its truly radical history erased, instead listed on flyers as one of the groups that holds meetings at Prairie Fire, although, as Miranda remarks, “What is with this group, SAFE? When is their meeting? ... they are listed, but I’ve never seen them actually meet” (64). Nash distances himself from them, claiming he merely facilitates “now and then” (64). Yet the message is clear. If SAFE was once a politically active group in the most obvious sense, here it continues as an avatar for Nash’s new principle of non-action; they never actually meet, but rather exist as a parody of action. Similarly the other groups Nash facilitates, which are primarily understood as a performance of politics:

Each meeting always started with a demand that all cops and media identify themselves and be excused from the meeting. It seemed at first genuine, then a little self-aggrandizing, and finally, she realized, after the third week, to be a parody of left-wing paranoia, to ridicule the people who imagined they were constantly surveiled or infiltrated. (62)

Indeed this parodied demand is the one constant these groups have, as their cause is interchangeable from week to week, as Miranda notes: “Nash’s groups never met more than once under the same name” (62).

Eat the Document suggests that while this can be read as an indictment of the poor state of political and cultural radicalism in 1990s America, at the same time these are the terms of an argument with a longer history, one Bobby and Mary engaged in in the 1960s, prior to their bombing campaign. In their earlier conversations, Mary’s stress is less on the intent she emphasizes to Jason thirty years later (273), but on the *uses* to which that particular

intent can be put. For Bobby, who has made a film intended to reveal the moral bankruptcy of a scientist behind the atomic bomb but which instead has resulted in humanizing him, the pursuit of truth means accepting that “[t]he truth is complicated. More complicated than we would like” (227). For Mary, this complexity “doesn’t inspire action” but rather “despair” (227). What’s more, while this “pursuit of art” may have “beauty, or even integrity” it is also a “privilege” (227) withheld from others. While this may seem at first sight to indicate a reversal in Mary’s thinking between the late 1960s and the 1990s from an emphasis on outcome to one on intent, if we instead consider these to be both parts of the same understanding of how one comes to act then Mary’s thinking actually displays a particular kind of consistency with regards to the over-arching concept of action. If her regret at the bombings leads her to retreat to a description of intention, she retains a conception of action in which means and ends are distinct; the regret comes from the use of what now look like the wrong means to achieve the same ends. Underlying her emphasis on intention is a continued belief in the correctness of the desired end. *Our analysis was correct*, she seems to suggest, *but the action that analysis led to was wrong*.³⁴

Nash’s thought, on the other hand, appears to have developed quite differently. If as Bobby his flaw was a faith in the relationship between truth and complexity, and art’s unique ability to tackle that complexity, as Nash his faith in art as a philosophical and political practice has diminished while his interest in aesthetics – both in an artistic sense and in a more generalized societal one – has increased. If in the late 1960s the value of art lay in its pursuit of truth through the tackling of complexity, in the 1990s aesthetics – understood in this rather loose way as style or appearance – is in itself a form of action because it makes a statement about individual attitude.³⁵ If in the sixties he understood the relationship between means and ends in similar ways to Mary – insofar as art was the means to the end of truth – in the nineties he champions an aestheticized means as an end in itself, or, rather, as a means adapted into an end in the face of a dearth of achievable ends. As he says: “The point isn’t to win. [One will] never win, of course. [One] just make[s] persuasive and

³⁴ This assessment is familiar from reflections on the period by former Weathermen activists. Sam Green and Bill Siegel end their 2002 film *The Weather Underground* with former Weatherman Mark Rudd coming to a rather Niebuhrian conclusion about his role in the sixties and seventies: “I find it hard ... to tease out what was right from what was wrong. I think that part of the Weatherman phenomenon which was right was our understanding of what the position of the United States is in the world. It was this knowledge that we just couldn’t handle, it was too big, we didn’t know what to do. In a way, I still don’t know what to do with this knowledge, I don’t know what needs to be done now. And it’s still eating away at me just as it did thirty years ago” (*Weather*).

³⁵ This understanding of aesthetics-as-action was a prime target of *The Baffler*’s articles on politics and culture in the 1990s.

powerful the beauty of [one's] opposition" (65). In some respects, this realization crystallizes the relationship between Bobby and Nash. If the latter is a somewhat emptied-out version of the former (he says to Henry that "I just slightly exist" [35]), surrounded by the artefacts of a radical tradition he himself is a (currently inactive) part of, with that history acting as the link between his two identities in the way Mary's favourite band and their hometown linked her with Caroline, Nash's perpetuation of his identity as Nash relies on that link being invisible to anyone but him.³⁶ Although, as we've discussed, the underground life has to a certain extent been generalized, Nash's case suggests that the practical concerns of the true underground fugitive distinguish him from this generalized version in an important way: the latter is, essentially, a performance of secrecy which is highly aware of the dynamics of hiding and revealing and plays on them accordingly. Josh, for instance, revels in them, creating an appearance of normality which "was so extreme as to be perverse" (146) while openly attending and facilitating hacker meetings at Prairie Fire. Miranda's observation that Josh is "in possession of a genuine secret life" needs a bit of tweaking though because it is a limited secrecy – not only does he attend meetings at Nash's bookstore but he doesn't hide his activities from Miranda. He has a picture of "[t]he sabot cat, the anarchist symbol for sabotage" (154) pinned to the wall above his computers and a tattoo of it on his chest. For all his talk of "interference" (154), Josh's secrecy extends only really to his parents, and only in relation to his stash of pot. Secrecy is not the practical mode of life it is for Nash, not even when we take into consideration Josh's operations as a hacker. In fact, when we do, we understand that Josh's form of secrecy is really only an isolated tactical element of his activity as a hacker; he relies on the corporations he hacks not knowing who alters their websites, but only for a certain period of time. The corporations soon discover the alterations and rectify them and Josh ends up working for one of them. Nash's double life, then, upholds a more strict demarcation between his two identities, even if they are in many ways similar, whereas Josh delights in a performance of uncertainty between two exaggeratedly opposite identities, an embrace of flexibility that surely prepares him for his embrace of capitalism's "elasticity." While both Nash and Josh are in some way doubled, or multiplied, Nash, we might suggest, is so in the way Karl Miller, in *Doubles: Studies in Literary History*, describes "division," in which "someone may be two people" (374). Josh, on the other hand, may be double in the sense

³⁶ The ideal fugitive, of course, would be able to completely erase or forget their past, so as to be less likely to unwittingly give themselves away. This remains difficult, dangerous and ultimately undesirable, though, because the risk of mental fragmentation and disintegration that would likely accompany it is so high. Nash and Mary need to maintain these faint links to their past selves in order to retain some thread, however thin, of their narratives of identity.

of “diffusion,” which for Miller entails the possibility that “someone may be more” (374). If Miller links this latter back to “those words of Dickens which Eliot applied to *The Waste Land*” – which ““does’ the ‘different voices’” (374) of Londoners – then we might suggest that Josh is able to “do the voices” of both subversive hacker and born-again capitalist.

5. Conclusions: Future-Oriented

In a passage from early in the novel (which we have looked at in part in the first section of this chapter) where Mary both reflects on her past and imagines a period of further reflection in the future, her emphasis on individual phenomenological experience acknowledges the difficulties of perspective that arise when one tries to understand one’s own history as it passes:

She imagined in future years there would be time to go over the series of events that led to the one event that inevitably led to the motel room. It felt like that, a whoosh of history, the somersault of dialectic rather than the firm step of will. The weight of centuries of history counterlevered against what, one person’s action? ... She knew she would comb over how she came to be involved with cells and plans and people who believed in the inevitable and absolute. Someday she would explain her intentions to someone ... And the event, which she could not think about, not yet, the event that she could not even name, she referred to in her thoughts as *then*, or *the thing*, or *it*. But surely in years to come she would think about it, over and over again, especially the part where Mary became Freya became Caroline. (14)

Mary here contrasts the totality of the “whoosh of history” with her own perspective, which can only talk in the equivocal terms of personal experience: “She imagined,” “It felt like that,” “Surely ...” But while this passage is on one level concerned with reflection on the past – her own in the present, having these thoughts which gaze back at her initial involvement with the radical group; even her anticipation of further reflection about events in process in this same present – it is also oriented toward the future, one in which a more properly historical narrative will hopefully be available. If, as Adam Kelly has noted, “the psycho-narration of the passage verges ... on narrated monologue, and the effect is to move the narration as close as possible to Mary’s thoughts” (2010, 200), then it is Mary herself who constructs these reflections in the future anterior, the tense of the anticipation of retrospection. As she accommodates herself to her new identities, moving from Caroline

to Louise, this deferred but always present (as hope) future becomes a kind of dream of clarity, but one that sometimes threatens to veer into nightmare. If Mary fears that the past solidifies behind the ever moving present, then this desired future may in fact present her with a narrative clarity that, as we saw earlier, “turn[s] the lies into history.”

That the same events might appear differently from different temporal perspectives raises the possibility that multiple narratives might spring up about those same events, and that such narratives will be the sites of power struggles over history. Mary’s fear that a new narrative will become the accepted version prefigures and gives impetus to *Eat the Document*’s broader examination of these issues in its incorporation of the notions of paradox, proliferation and co-optation. The paradox at the heart of Henry’s life becomes occasion for the sacrifice of close fidelity to events (however improbable) in favour of a moral fable that extracts meaning from the paradox. The dissemination of the language and atmosphere of the fugitive life into the common understanding of suburbia leads to a generalization of the underground life, obscuring the political causes that impel it, and suggests that the passage of time increases rather than decreases the store of possible narratives and meanings. If this proliferation of narratives bears a certain relation to the process in which new ideas and concepts become accommodated into previous ones and individuals acclimatize themselves to them, this process also lies at the heart of theories of co-optation. These theories see this process negatively in terms of oppositions between historical actors. In this scenario, a process which some might call cyclical and describe in terms of new ideas upsetting old ones before becoming old themselves and being upset by still newer ideas, is understood more entropically as radical outsiders being slowly drawn into compromise with the mainstream they set out to oppose.

Spiotta is wary of what she calls the “circular mess of relativity” (75) proliferation can lead to, or the “both/and” dynamics Linda Hutcheon saw in postmodernism. She instead shares with Mary the faith in reaching a point at which the differences – and, presumably, the similarities – between the 1960s and 1990s will be fully identified and analyzed. Yet that doesn’t mean she ever achieves it. The novel takes its leave of Mary as she reveals her past to Jason and meets Nash/Bobby in a bar days before his capture, and as we saw earlier, she is never able to construct that explanation. Mary’s experience is more characterized by the uncertainty of the arrival of the future (“*Someday* she would explain” [14, my emphasis]), and this is something Spiotta’s novel shares.

The novel's final perspective belongs to Jason, whose journal entries (another way of marking change) have peppered it. In this section of less than two pages, after having uncovered his mother's past, he reflects on the passing of his obsession with the Beach Boys and looks forward to a new stage in his life in a way that recalls his mother's underground reflections in its attention to the events of the past, the process of transition and change, and a time of clearer future reflection. The journal entry places in starker and more self-aware terms what we observed about Mary's change to Caroline, and begins by saying that "[i]t didn't happen the way I imagined it would. No drama, no epiphanies. No breakpoint. Just a gradual and increasing distance" (288). This is restated halfway through: "As I said, it wasn't dramatic" (289). While he retains a physical and psychological proximity to the records – "[t]he plastic-sleeve-encased vinyl sits untouched in a box in my room ... I still admire them" (288) – a new distance has crept in that prevents the "deep-felt desire" he once had to listen to them "over and over" from surfacing again (288). He is referring to an absolute – he "never listen[s] to the Beach Boys anymore. Not a note, not ever" (288) – but the way he has arrived at that absolute point has been and remains unclear to him to the extent that he cannot tell whether he "found the other things first" that "pushed the Beach Boys slowly to the perimeter" or whether his interest dissipated first, leaving a "vacated space" for "other things to fill" (288). This moment of reflection, this point of stillness, is comparable perhaps to Mary's in the motel room where she reflects on the past and an imagined future simultaneously, for it is at this moment that Jason explains the two reasons behind his desire to hold onto those artefacts of the past: "First, at some point enough time will have gone by of not listening that I'll listen again," and

second ... I feel compelled to keep these artifacts ... because of something I am quite certain will transpire. I need these records because one day, years from now, I will listen to this music and I will remember exactly what it was like to be me now, or me a year ago, at fifteen ... in this very specific place and time ... Something in that music will recall not just what happened but all of what I felt, all of what I longed for, all of who I used to be. And that will be something, don't you think?" (289-90)

These are the last words of the novel and they uncannily echo Mary's desire in 1972. The certainty she possessed – "She knew she would comb over how she came to be involved" (14) – is present in Jason's assertion that he's keeping the records because of "something I am quite certain will transpire." Jason's certainty, like his mother's, is less about the time at which this future will arrive but more about its particular quality, and the position it will

allow him to look back on his life and have a clearer idea of what he was in the past, which is, at the moment of assertion, his present. If Mary declares “[s]omeday she would explain” (14) Jason feels he “will remember exactly what it was like” to be him at this particular point.

While we see some of the future Mary subsequently experiences – the majority of the novel, save for the moments of analepsis to her history in the group, is set after 1972, though it ends in 2000 – we don’t see any of that Jason projects into. As I’ve mentioned above, Mary doesn’t conclusively reach that future she desires so much, and her anticipation of retrospection points further into the novel. Conversely, because Jason’s anticipation forms the last section of the novel, Spiotta ensures that *Eat the Document* ends by projecting into a future it will not show us, and because that anticipation echoes his mother’s towards the beginning of the novel, it ends also by *returning* to the mode it began with, which encourages us to return to the past, to go over the novel again, as well as anticipating that un-shown future beyond the novel’s span as one in which a similar return will be undertaken by Jason himself.

What exactly are these pasts, then, the ones that will be gone over? They have three characteristics. Firstly, by encouraging the reader to return to the starting point of the narrative – the point in 1972 when the radical group goes underground – Spiotta is constructing a bounded temporal period between the present and the dog-days of the New Left in the early 1970s. It is this past, Spiotta is saying, that will be important. By refusing to undertake that retrospection fully and by positing instead a somewhat unspecific “day, years from now” in which it will occur, Spiotta is making a categorical statement about the sixties-seventies period: not only is it important now, and not only will it be important at a specific date in the future, but it will continue to be important in the future as a whole.

Secondly, by suggesting that “at some point” he’ll “listen again [to the Beach Boys] and [they] might sound fresh and new” (289), Spiotta suggests that the sixties might act as a source of renewal. As Jason puts it:

It could again totally engage me, maybe in even deeper ways because I’ll be an older, and presumably deeper, person. I might find things in it I never was able to hear before in my younger life. I might become just as enchanted, just as joyously captivated. I could fall in love all over again. (289)

Like Jennifer Egan in *The Invisible Circus*, Spiotta holds out the possibility that certain elements of the 1960s and 1970s – be they simply the cultural artefacts the quotation above points to, or something less literal, a certain spirit, perhaps, for which the Beach Boys are a stand-in – will be in some way recoverable. While our interest in them and their relevance to us may seem at this present moment diminished, in the future this may not be the case. If Egan suggests that to come to a greater and more accurate appraisal of the period a certain amount of historicization is required, here Spiotta acknowledges that the future in which such recovery might occur is one in which individuals like Jason – in familiar future anterior terms – will have become both actively engaged in and subject to (as part of a society-wide process) such historicization.

Thirdly, Spiotta suggests that it is this past and its artefacts that will be able to tell Jason “exactly what it was like to be [him] now, or a year ago.” By recovering the vitality of the 1960s, then, Jason will be able to access the reality of what he was like in the 1990s and 2000s. In other words: in the future, by recovering the reality of the 1960s and 1970s, one will know who one was in the current present, which will by then be the past. More specifically: in the future Jason will know who he was in the 1990s by recovering elements of the 1960s. The same, to a certain extent, is true of Mary: Jason realizes who his mother is by watching a long lost film about the sixties band Love, in which his mother appears. In other words, Jason finds out who his mother is *not* in the present by finding out who she *was* in the past. This kind of backwards logic is the closest Spiotta comes to answering the question she sets herself in the novel, namely what is the relationship between the 1960s and the 1990s? But this nearest answer defers giving an actual answer until some point in the future; the novel seems to be saying that we don’t know the proper relationship now, but we will in the future.

When Mary gives birth to Jason, she realizes that “[n]o mother could be truly secure or certain” about the future (232). In fact, “to be a human is to be perpetually insecure, always edging on death, chaos, the uncontrollable. Being a mother made this apparent” (233). With this new perspective,

[s]he now viewed the world in a different context. We all can and will be overwhelmed in the middle of the night by the given. And seeing how it is all so fraught and doomed, why not take the greatest risks? [Mary] felt a cosmic calm as she held her baby and promised to protect him for as long as she could. Giving birth

for her was a revolutionary act. How could she embrace uncertainty more profoundly?
(233)

There is a contradiction at the heart of this that places Mary in the company of those characters in *The Invisible Circus* who find themselves struggling between a more accurate appraisal of the sixties and maintaining their utopian faith. Mary comes to understand that her fears about the future, previously concerned with her capture by the FBI, are those of any mother who worries about her child. If, as she says, “her loneliness [has been] the crucial difficulty of her underground life” (232), this recognition of community and common feeling relieves that, at least to a certain extent. Embracing the uncertainty of the future gains her a “cosmic calm” in this respect, although as we have seen she also relies on the future to provide her with a more complete narrative of her past and current present. Her acceptance of the unknowability of the future, then, threatens the solidity of her faith (which she needs) in its explanatory power. If her embrace of uncertainty recalls Reinhold Niebuhr’s insistence on the elusiveness of particular kinds of historical knowledge, then Mary’s hope for future explanation – and Spiotta’s formal decision to leave that future one ‘to come’ – bespeaks a kind of utopian faith. Like Egan, Spiotta constructs a narrative in which the protagonists end in suspension. As Mary wonders to herself, looking at her sleeping child and considering when she will reveal her history to him: “Is it time yet?”
(233)

The ‘Problems’ of Multiplicity:
Christopher Sorrentino’s *Trance*

Christopher Sorrentino’s *Trance* (2005) offers a fictional account of the 1974 kidnapping of the newspaper heiress Patty Hearst by a radical left-wing group called the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). After a period of time as their hostage, she declared her enlistment in the SLA and was photographed in army fatigues brandishing a machine gun during a bank robbery.³⁷ If Susan Choi’s 2003 novel *American Woman*, which covers almost exactly the same events as *Trance*, focuses on the personal experience of one person involved in the affair – a character Choi calls Jenny Shimada, an SLA fellow traveller, whom Sorrentino names Joan Shimada – Sorrentino takes a broader view less identified with one particular character. The novel switches between the perspectives of, among others, various members of the would-be revolutionary cell who kidnap the Patty Hearst figure (in *Trance* named Alice Galton before she adopts the name Tania), law enforcement officers from the FBI and local police departments, representatives of the media, Alice’s mother and father, members of the wider network of the New Left, a “radical sportswriter” (122) called Guy Mock, a couple of police informants, and a prison education worker named Lionel Congreaves. If these viewpoints inevitably emphasize different aspects of the case, Sorrentino does not suggest that they might accumulate into a totalizing, objective account of the events. Instead, he chooses to focus on the problems that arise when trying to account for a series of events with multiple actors. Although, as we will see, they are by no means internally uniform, admitting a great deal of variation, Sorrentino does alight on identifiable problems and aspects of the creation of historical narratives. If the novel suggests the possibility that multiple perspectives on the same events might not in fact help clarify those events but actually serve to obfuscate or interfere with them, Sorrentino is keen to explore the relative merits and de-merits of forms of storytelling that seek to de-personalize the narrative voice in the search for a more collective mode of narration. In so doing, *Trance* recalls the efforts of the collective novel of the 1920s and 30s, particularly the social (if not temporal) breadth of John Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). More than this though, Sorrentino opens up a conversation with Norman Mailer, a figure who as we shall see haunts *Trance*. The key Mailer text for

³⁷ This image, which became iconic, decorates the cover the UK paperback edition of Sorrentino’s novel, nicely referring to the intertwining of ‘real’ and fiction in the novel itself.

Sorrentino is *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, originally published in 1968, and we will see how Sorrentino's "Author's Note" at the end of *Trance* seems particularly to be speaking to it and its author. If for Mailer questions of the formal cohesiveness of both novel and history rest in their marshalling of the relationship between individual and group, Sorrentino incorporates into his novel a number of individuals who find themselves unable to narrate a series of events – especially ones in which they themselves were involved – because of those events' multiple participants. Ultimately, however, although Sorrentino considers the problematic nature of the relationship between subjective experience and objective historical accounts, he differs from Mailer inasmuch as his key concern is the establishment of narrative independence, which he uses as a kind of resolution to such problems. This is borne out in his relaxed attitude (at least when compared to his peers in this thesis) toward the tension between individual and collective accounts of events. Sorrentino views them almost dialectically: individual narratives are so because they are distinct – independent – from others which when considered together form a collective view of history unburdened by the requirements of objectivity or totality but which remain faithful to the bare events underneath those narratives.

1. History, Media, Multiplicity

Sorrentino presents the SLA as a group who self-consciously desire an entrance into history, one succinctly captured in the novel by a fellow traveller who helps the group hide from the FBI. Susan, who has previously described how she "*hated* those bastards [the SLA]" (128) for confirming all the worst suspicions the conservative right had about the New Left and the counterculture, joins them because they seem to offer the best chance of being involved with something of historical import: "she's caught up in something now, committed, successfully outpacing her boredom, for once. She will be drawn in and implicated, move beyond the everyday, into a kind of history, a legend amid the outlaw annals, larger than ideology" (363). Being committed is one thing, but one's choice needs to be recognized, and the SLA identify the news media as the primary vehicle for this recognition. Although they revile this institution as part of the "Fascist Insect that Preys upon the Life of the People" (52), they also admire its distributive power, which speaks to the SLA's desperation to implant their carefully controlled self-image in the hearts and minds of the public. Using the media, then, is as much due to the desire for validation and

recognition as it is political policy.³⁸ Such desire is even more forcefully displayed when Guy Mock approaches the SLA with a book proposal, selling them on the idea that “there is definite clamor” for their story by telling them that “I heard **Norman Mailer** was on his way to JFK to grab the first flight to the Coast the minute he heard about the shoot-out? **Tom Wolfe** was desperate for a piece of it. **Hunter Thompson** expressed a strong interest” (252, Sorrentino’s emphasis). If starring in a piece of New Journalism is an enticing possibility for the SLA, it is because the form comes with a legitimacy conferred by its transformation of the cultural immediacy celebrated by and in the work of the Beats and poets like Frank O’Hara – the instant manipulation of experience into art – into an (apparent) ability to turn the overwhelming scramble of events into a definitive history even as that history is in formation. As Tom Wolfe wrote, defining the New Journalism in a *New York* magazine article in 1972: “There it was, a short story, complete with symbolism, in fact, and yet true-life, as they say, about something that happened today, and you could pick it up on the newsstand by 11 tonight for a dime...” (“Birth”). If Egan’s character Wolf criticizes the counterculture for turning its desire too readily into self-congratulation, it is nonetheless (still) accorded value in the form of Mailer’s defining accounts of the 1967 March on the Pentagon in *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* and the 1968 Democratic Party convention in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (both published in very quick turnarounds in 1968). If it is this kind of immediate recognition the SLA claim and hope for themselves, they also seek induction into a more radical canon that includes Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1968), George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* (1970) and the Weather Underground’s *Prairie Fire* (1974). Nevertheless it is unclear if they fully understand that it is not only their appearance in the canon but the creation of it in the first place that constitutes an act of historicization, which here is double-layered: insertion into a canon, the formation of a canon (we will come back to this).

The opening passages of the novel depict a small cell of the SLA – Alice Galton, who has renamed herself Tania, Teko and Yolanda – shoplifting from a camping store and Tania firing at it to free her comrades. While this is understood as to a certain extent an over-reaction, it is also seen immediately as a media-friendly event. If “Yolanda turns the dashboard radio dial searching for news reports, while Teko drives [the getaway car]” (10), their need to switch cars is used as an occasion for a spot of media relations, incorporating

³⁸ In this sense they are predecessors of the teenagers in *Eat the Document*: “There was nothing these kids respected like media connections,” writes Spiotta (215).

into their hijacking of a car a sort of propagandistic version of the photo opportunity:

Yolanda calls her to the Pontiac.

“This is Arthur, and, Ruby? Ruby. Arthur and Ruby are letting us have their car for now ... Would you please tell them who *you* are?”

She smiles, broadly, as she’s been told, and removes the eyeglasses. Neither crude disguise nor subsistence rations nor the rigors of combat training have altered a face everyone has come to know.

Speaking slowly and clearly, she says, “I’m Tania Galton.” (7)

This passage belies the concerted effort of a media strategy. The self-conscious theatricality with which Yolanda sets up the punch-line – “would you please tell them who *you* are?” – recalls comedic double-acts, and the impression of drama is furthered by the narrative’s suggestion of rehearsals – “as she’s been told.” Tania’s stating of her new name works almost as a soundbite, two words that encapsulate the story the SLA want to tell using her face. “Tania Galton” – the first name an insertion of herself into a revolutionary narrative (“Tania the Guerrilla” was the revolutionary name of Tamara Bunke, who fought alongside Che Guevara), the second an indication of this new revolutionary’s past as a Californian heiress. If the “crude disguise,” “subsistence rations” and the “rigors of combat training” have not altered her beyond recognition, their nonetheless readable presence on her face is a visual accompaniment to the transformation implied by her name, the slow delivery of which, a staged ‘coming out,’ re-stages the debutante balls of her class. While she was once Alice Galton, the daughter of a newspaper owner and the epitome of rich opulence, she is now coming out into society as a convert to the People’s cause, committed to the overthrow of the US government.

The SLA’s distrust of the media leads them to attempt other, more direct methods of communication with the People, all of which serve instead to reveal their inadequacies as spokespersons for the working class. Sometimes this occurs as a fairly brazen – as well as comic and pitiful – appropriation of the People’s cars and houses: “We’re the SLA. Freedom fighters fighting on behalf of all the People. Maybe ... you’ve heard of us” (59). Other occasions reveal the SLA’s disconnection still further, particularly the series of “dead drops” they make to distribute a “Letter to the People” (62) – in post offices, a coffee shop in a predominantly black area of Los Angeles, and a shopping arcade. Sorrentino juxtaposes the three letter drops – carried out by Tania, Yolanda and Teko

respectively – with the rest of the SLA as they commandeer a house in South Los Angeles, in the process preventing a mother from feeding her kids their breakfast, a mother who finds “only one [of the SLA who] didn’t creep around like she was in a museum of black people” (64). This distance between the SLA and the People is reinforced in the dead drops. In the first, at a post office, Tania “feels exposed,” “an oddity here in Compton” (64). In the second, the women that run the coffee shop sense an implicit racism in Yolanda’s standoffishness: “Damn, they got a what you call, Hamburger Hamlet, right up near the Forum if she only want to eat where the white people at” (66). At the third, Teko doesn’t even consider those in the shopping arcade to be worth acknowledging. An old woman mutters to him: “*please do not push past me, I told you that I will move out of your way just as I did before, you have only to ask*” (68, Sorrentino’s emphasis). To further emphasize this separation during these episodes, Sorrentino has the novel’s narrative voice take on an intense and intimate focalization through the people in the post office, the coffee shop and the store. Each episode begins with the speech of these people, undifferentiated from the narrative voice (through the use of quotation marks, for instance) to give the impression that the novel itself has connected with and has access to the people in a way the SLA don’t. In the post office, we hear the moaning of two post office workers: “He says, Are you telling me these trucks stayed right here, and I said, Yes, *sir*” (63). In the coffee shop, we hear the gossip of two black women: “Mmmmm-hmm. So I say, I’m a tell you what you need to do, girl. You better watch your mouth” (65). In the shopping arcade, we hear the mournful-yet-philosophical old lady describing her efforts to find her lost cat: “So I’m out here with my staple gun and my flyers, going round and hoping for the best” (67). By plunging us immediately into the midst of these conversations, all of which are moments of self-narration of past events (or present events which only make sense with contextual information from the past) engaged in communally, Sorrentino creates an intimacy between these nameless characters and the reader that is not established between us and the SLA, an intimacy enhanced by seeing the actions of the SLA through these anonymous individuals’ eyes. The post office workers pause from their moaning to observe Tania trying to deposit the Letter: “Say, now what’s that gal up to?” (64). The women in the coffee shop notice Yolanda’s bedraggled appearance and ask “*Honey, what can I get you?*” (66, Sorrentino’s italics). The old woman, polite-yet-exasperated with Teko, asks him: “*Young man, do you need to get in here?*” (68, Sorrentino’s italics). In contrast, when the narrative voice switches and focalizes back on the members of the SLA, it is more distanced, both in tone and in the separation – not just through paragraphs but gaps between the paragraphs – from the previous narration. This distance is emphasized by

the more drily factual descriptions this voice makes: moving from the postal workers, the voice describes Tania as she “stands and readjusts her wig” (64). Switching from the coffee shop women to Yolanda, the narrative informs us: “In the ladies’ room Yolanda raises her shirt and untapes the note” (66). Only in the last episode, with Teko, is this disinterested tone tempered somewhat – “This is General Teko’s most daring move yet” (68) – but only so that Teko’s hypocrisy can be better revealed through the narrative voice’s access to his thoughts. Thus, the old woman is described as an “old biddy” and he seems to approve of the “incongruity of the LETTER TO THE PEOPLE amid the ads for dance lessons and used cars” (69) in a snobbishly contemptuous tone that suggests that this letter is not just a missive but also a sermon, reaching out to the People while it chastizes them for the smallness of their lives. In a similar way, Yolanda is proud of herself for deigning to step into the coffee shop to deposit her letter in the ladies’ room because she can use it as proof that she is establishing a real connection with the People: “She tells herself that she feels closer to these people every day. She is trying hard to love them” (66). As Guy Mock later muses, in the SLA’s case the concept of the “People” is one that “seems to manage better in the abstract” (170).

This tone-deafness with which the SLA go about communicating with the People is matched by an earnestness emanating from their utter conviction that what they are doing will gain them entry to history. At times, it is depicted as being so much at the heart of SLA groupthink that little temporal distance remains between their actions and their historicizations of them, something we saw in *The Invisible Circus*. In Egan’s novel, Wolf describes the event that gives the novel its title as one marked by the simultaneity of actions and their historicization, where Richard Brautigan wrote up ‘newspapers’ about the events which participants read while those events were on-going. If for Wolf this marked a fundamental hubris present in the New Left and the counterculture, in *Trance* it is registered as a possible spur for SLA recruitment, as they are able to assure potential recruits that they are involved in something with real historical proportions – just listen to the news! On returning to Los Angeles after their underground summer on the east coast, the SLA enlists the help of hitherto peripheral figures in the New Left. These new recruits’ commitment is ensured by the availability of constant external confirmation of their actions’ historical import in the form of news bulletins: “Roger drives to the Bay Area, listening to a special radio broadcast, *The Kidnapping of Alice Galton: A Year Passes*” (357). Yet this confirmation isn’t just a recruitment tool; rather its use as such evolves out of the internal atmosphere of the SLA. Late in the novel, even as the SLA is disintegrating, Teko is

“stopping to examine the newspaper headlines. *Hey, hey, SLA, made page one again today*” (343).

If this ability to constantly corroborate the historical nature of their actions – like Wolf’s companions did, through the news – acts as a reassurance, when this process is upset – as it is for Teko, Yolanda and Tania when the police lay siege to the SLA safehouse while they are out, separating them from their companions, and, in Tania’s case, her lover – those who are excluded understand themselves to be prevented from entering history. These three are condemned to watch the siege on TV in a motel room opposite Disneyland. Once separated from the scene of their entrance into history, the SLA three become one participant among many. Sorrentino depicts this quite literally, switching between the capitalized addresses of the police on the scene who speak through a bullhorn to the revolutionaries inside the besieged house, the italicized narration of the television news anchor, and the individual thoughts and comments of the SLA three. The novel’s spatial organization reflects not only the competing forces involved in the story and how the SLA are forced to fight over narrative duties, but by depicting it in the spatial order police-media-SLA, the reader sees how the SLA have to rely on the media for access to the siege itself:

WE’RE TAKING AUTOMATIC FIRE FRONT AND BACK FROM THIS
LOCATION; THEY’RE MUCH BETTER ARMED THAN WE ARE.

*Police are saying the fugitives are better armed than they are.
holding the Negro residents of the house hostage.*

Teko: “Bullshit! Fascist bullshit!” (86)

We see here how multiple perspectives facilitate disjunction rather than cohesion. These three narrative strands are entwined but at odds with one another: if the capitalized police narrative is interested in the economy of fact and invested with the urgency of physical threat, the italicized media are both faithful rabbits of the police and irresponsible inventors (the SLA are not holding the Negro residents hostage). The SLA three, meanwhile, already pushed to the side of history, are cast in a purely reactionary role, responding to narratives presented to them by others. Yet if the police’s authority here seems to confer upon them a privileged access to reality, the passage as a whole does much to disabuse the reader of that impression. The police report “A *POSSIBLE* WOUNDED TEAM MEMBER” (87, my emphasis) and that “ONE’S FIRING, HE CAME OUT AND WENT BACK IN, *POSSIBLY* HIT” (89, my emphasis). Similarly, their statements that “YOU WILL NOT

BE HARMED” (90) are later directly contradicted by their own actions, as they fire incendiaries into the house to burn the revolutionaries alive. On the media’s part, their members don’t even know where they are: “Is this Watts? Says one reporter. Watts, damn it? Someone said Compton and I want to know is it Watts?” (88). The SLA three’s assertions, meanwhile, Sorrentino tells us, have a “dubious accuracy” (86).

The siege, then, the set-piece that ends the first section of the novel, crystallizes some of the problems Sorrentino finds in accounting for historical events with multiple actors. But in the exaggerations of the media, it also brings to the fore another related concern, namely distortion. While the TV news’ “live” (83) presentation of the siege claims immediacy and privileged access, this is revealed to be an illusion covering multiple mediations and re-mediations: if the police on the scene are narrating the siege as they see it unfold (with all the accompanying uncertainty that involves), the news media not only rely on these uncertainties but add to them their own suppositions, the unsubstantiated nature of these suppositions belied either by outright questions – “*Is she in there?*” (85, Sorrentino’s emphasis) – or by inserted disclaimers: “*We are not sure*”; “*may be in there ... repeat may*” (86, Sorrentino’s emphasis); “*unsubstantiated reports that there are hostages*”; “*speculated the SLA may have picked this house...*” (87, Sorrentino’s emphasis); “*I’m told*”; “*Unknown*”; “*a young woman who may have been*” (88, Sorrentino’s emphasis); “*She may have been one of the Negro hostages*”; “*All are probably dead*” (90, Sorrentino’s emphasis); “*Can’t say but maybe. Maybe an explosion*” (91, Sorrentino’s emphasis). Against this volubility is placed the double silence of the SLA: those in the house unable – prevented – from providing their perspective, the perspective of those in the motel watching on TV sidelined and made irrelevant. What might look like a variety of perspectives is actually an inaccurate and unbalanced distortion: the police say what they (think they) see, with the possibility of later revisions, the media repeatedly indicate their uncertainty, and the SLA are silenced.

If the siege offers a vivid thematic depiction of the proliferation of narratives and of media interference, *Trance* incorporates the language, style and delivery of television news into its own narrative voice. One of the “Interludes” that punctuate the novel is entitled “Dateline: Hillsborough” (325, Hillsborough is the Galton’s family home) and is delivered in the style, complete with teletype-style font, of an improvized, real-time narration by a TV news anchor:

The press has been here every day. The
 Galtons
 the gracious Galtons
 have been very accommodating of the needs
 of the press.
 They understand as perhaps few others can
 that the press has a job to do. Just as they
 just as the FBI
 has its job.
 The first family of journalism. Henry Galton
 is publisher of the *San Francisco Examiner*.
 Handsome, amiable fellow.
 Under strain, though under visible strain
 visibly under strain. This ordeal. The
 ordeal of his daughter, kidnapped just a
 little under a year ago, by the radical
 the radical left-wing
 Symbionese Liberation Army. (328)

This is a depiction of the process of narration as it occurs, a narration of narration, complete with real-time editing and attempted clarifications. If Wolf in *The Invisible Circus* notes the preponderance of the anticipation of retrospection in the New Left, and Sorrentino agrees in his presentation of the SLA's obsession with history, here the latter goes one step further and suggests that the institution of the news media – and by extension America as a whole – is constantly participating in the narration of and reflection upon events as they happen; in a huge collective instance of the anticipation of retrospection. In this passage in particular, the insistent reflection on its process of narration through the edition and refinement of its language contributes to the distortion we've been examining, even as Sorrentino asks it to do the job of moving his own novel's narrative along. It could be said that the constant refining of language – “under strain, though, under visible strain visibly under strain” – has the precise opposite effect to that intended. Rather than getting closer to the truth of the matter, it in fact opens up an increasing amount of narrative possibilities, the repetition of minute variations on particular phrases working towards a defamiliarization and distortion of those phrases and their component words. Seemingly subtle differences can point to wider divergences: while “the Galtons” infers a reasonable

and professional distance between the reporters and the subjects of their story, the “gracious Galtons” suggests a rather closer, and even mutually beneficial, relationship between the newspaper mogul and the reporters camped out on his lawn, for whom he provides food and coffee (116). Similarly, is the separation of “this ordeal” and “the ordeal of his daughter” another case of linguistic refinement or a separation of two ordeals, that of the parents and that of the daughter? And what of the alternative described in propaganda recordings by that very daughter, the possibility that it isn’t an ordeal at all, but rather an awakening? What is the significance of the clarification that the SLA is a *left-wing* radical group?

Later on in the novel, the incorporation of news language becomes more pronounced, even as it is more seamlessly accommodated into the fabric of the novel, with Sorrentino including newspaper editorials without the separating facility of the Interlude. A few pages prior to these incorporations, the novel follows a couple of FBI agents in a car as they trail Guy Mock, who has vanished after it has become clear he is wanted for questioning. Sorrentino switches to a few other scenes of the revolutionaries in their safe-house before returning to the Mock strand in the form of two invented newspaper reports, the first one attributed to N. Palmer Hockley of the *New York Times*, the second to one Dorsey Nebarez of the *San Francisco Examiner*. Hockley’s piece picks up the Mock strand from where we left it, describing how a “man sought by Federal authorities for questioning in connection with the militant Symbionese Liberation Army emerged from the shadowy world of the radical underground less than twenty-four hours after televised news reports that he and his wife had left the country” (390). Nebarez’s carries news of an editorial by Galton praising the Mocks and suggesting that they have not committed any crimes. It mentions in passing that the Mocks have recently re-appeared after being in hiding for a couple of months. After these ‘news’ reports, the novel returns to the Galtons’ home and a scene in which Lydia reproaches Hank for the aforementioned editorial. Here then, Sorrentino is not only asking invented news reports to bear the explanatory weight and momentum of the novel’s narrative, but offers these as the only way a reader can gain particular pieces of information, however slanted or open to ulterior motives they may be. (The fact that they are is communicated forcefully in the scene between Lydia and Hank, in which the former is angry that the latter would so obviously and shamelessly attempt to curry favour with the SLA [393-5]). The two reports themselves are not only sequential in the sense that the events covered in the first are referred to in the second, but as a unit they are part of the

narrative chain of the novel which includes the scenes before of the FBI agents and that after of Hank and Lydia at home.

Both of these examples, however – the teletyped address and the newspaper articles – are not what they say they are; *Trance* is by-and-large not a collage novel although Sorrentino does admit in his Author's Note at the end of the novel that he has "freely included invented documents, newspaper articles, and the like alongside genuine ones" (515) (we will return to the Author's Note in more detail later on). Both the Hockley and Nebarez articles were written by Sorrentino expressly for this novel, fiction in the style of nonfiction. Yet in this case those categories become less meaningful: if all of it is fiction, the apparent nonfiction just a style, then there is no balancing comparison to be made from invoking nonfiction. Clearly some blurring of these categories is going on here, but the effect is not simply to suggest that the news uses similar narrative techniques to fiction, or vice versa, but to bring into the process of reading *Trance* the same sort of frustrations and distortions that interest it on a thematic level. Because those categories of fiction and nonfiction are not stable, we can't make any inquiries about where the apparent blurring between them begins and ends; these extracts don't work on the logic of fiction and nonfiction even while they invoke it stylistically.

The uncertainty observed here is not limited to those moments where a 'news voice' is incorporated into the novel in these explicit ways. If the second example above represents a more integrated incorporation than the first, the following example bespeaks a more generalized operation whereby what appears initially as a (fairly) traditional third-person narration is revealed to incorporate the same kinds of uncertainty as those invented news reports:

On March 30, 1972, two policemen on patrol were hailed by a Berkeley housewife who told them that she was smelling gas "out back." After advising dispatch to notify PG&E, the cops went into the alley that ran behind the street, where they made a cursory examination of the area, just sticking around until the utility guys arrived. The alley was lined with freestanding garages on one side, with the backs of bungalows and apartment houses on the other. Coming from one of the garages was a keen, chemical odor that aroused the curiosity of the cops, not the odor of gas, but it was a faintly familiar smell, and it was a slow morning, and they had a valid pretext, so what the hell. The cops picked the garage door lock easily and rolled it up,

extending daylight into the small space. There they discovered the appurtenances and raw materials that constituted what the newspapers, with typical color, soon described as a “massive” bomb factory. Although, coming almost exactly two years after members of the Weather Underground had blown up a Greenwich Village town house by accidentally touching off thirty sticks of dynamite, such hyperbole was perhaps understandable. (234)

In naming the date of the events to be recounted, the paragraph begins by displaying an attention to detail akin to that claimed by newspapers, police accounts or what Norman Mailer called “the general style of historical writing” (1994, 255). Its placement of the vernacular phrase “out back” in quotation marks affirms this impression by establishing a certain distance between the authoritative narrative voice and this colloquial speech. That the paragraph doesn’t paraphrase or otherwise render this vernacular into English more consistent with its opening tone suggests that the narrative voice has certain pretensions towards objectivity and accuracy: *while it may not be standard English usage*, this voice seems to be saying, *it is nonetheless what the housewife in question said and I have a duty to report that accurately*. The next half-sentence – “After advising dispatch to notify PG&E” – has a rather insular, specific quality to it. This is the language police use with other police, not public language, and it is also perhaps the slightly stiff usage police reports in particular might use. The same is true of the phrase “There they discovered the appurtenances and raw materials” later on in the extract. By contrast the phrases “just sticking around until the utility guys arrived” and “it was a slow morning, ... valid pretext ... what the hell” seem to channel the trains of thought of the two policemen through the use of more colloquial language, yet because of the lack of quotation marks – conspicuous given their earlier use – it doesn’t seem to be directly voicing these individual policemen. Rather, the narrative voice here adopts a tone sympathetic to their casual use of language without actually directly voicing them. It is reminiscent of a tone favoured by David Foster Wallace, whose writing often displays a sympathetic taking on of the linguistic traits of the character through which events are focalized, something Wallace in turn takes from James Joyce.³⁹

If “extending daylight into the small space” reads as a poetic or novelistic addition to the basic information of lifting the garage door, the phrase “typical color” seems to channel

³⁹ Hugh Kenner called it the “Uncle Charles principle” (*Joyce’s Voices*, 15).

public wisdom on a particular tendency of the press, setting it apart from the first part of the sentence in which it appears, which as we noted above reads like the official language of the police report. If the extract has until now, even with the differences and switches we've been noting, still been readable on the whole as an approximation of the disinterested tone of news, official reports or history, this phrase suggests not just a particular value judgement about the news media but also, in its appeal to popular wisdom in the use of word "typical," switches the narrative voice from an official-sounding *individual* source to a more public, *collective* one. While the use of quotation marks around the word "massive" distances the narrative voice in a similar way to its previous use of these marks, quoting it at all rather than replacing it with a more accurate description (assuming the implications about the incorrectness of this description are correct), paradoxically confers on it a measure of respectability. When looked at in combination, then, the use of both "typical color" and "massive" begins to call into question the accuracy and validity of the events being described, particularly as the extract introduces elements of doubt – and even active fictionalization – at precisely the point it reaches the communication of a key piece of information: that a bomb factory was found. The narrative voice seems to be suggesting that there are other reasons for the newspapers to call the factory "massive," reasons which have nothing to do with accuracy but instead with conforming to and reinforcing a previously outlined narrative about the threat of left-wing terrorism. Indeed, the novel seems to confirm this impression in the next sentence, which gives mitigating circumstances for the newspapers' exaggeration – the Weather Underground bombing two years previously, which although un-dated here, is recognisable to readers as the Greenwich Village townhouse bombing of the 6th March 1970. Furthermore, the narrative voice seems to point toward a more general atmosphere of fear and exaggeration when it allows that "such hyperbole was perhaps understandable"; such is the cultural and political climate in America at this particular time that accurate reporting may be jeopardized, or impossible.

If local – be they temporal or spatial – conditions can effect what seems accurate or reasonable, Sorrentino remarks in his Author's Note that accounts of the SLA written in the mid-70s "provided a vivid glimpse" of the time but have "suffered from the passage of time in all the usual ways. Facts have been superseded by newer and more influential facts. The authors frequently bring to their material oddly insistent personal agendas, at once both tangential to and entangled with the larger subject" (515). If this suggests that facts are not universal and are subject to change – or at least recontextualization – then it also

suggests that the assessment that the bomb factory was “massive” comes from subjective factors as much as, if not more than, objective ones: massive compared to other (recent) ones, like the Weather Underground one in New York; massive from the perspective of people not used to seeing bomb factories; massive to individuals living in a cultural atmosphere of fear; massive from the point of view of conservative newspapers and television stations with an interest in making the threat out to be as large as possible, and so on. Comparing the size of the factory from other perspectives – temporal, geographical or political – might make it appear rather small.

While the agreed size of the bomb factory is subject to all sorts of local influences, the ability to confer upon this uncertainty a degree of ‘understandability,’ as the narrative voice does in our extract, only comes with retrospect. While the newspapers at the time had one point of comparison – the Weather Underground bombing – only the novel can put it into a larger context. Furthermore, not only does the novel have this privilege but it explicitly takes advantage of it by designating the description “massive” in the final analysis a hyperbolic one. While this is welcome insofar as it introduces a note of skepticism with regards to the media’s neutrality, it doesn’t necessarily allow us to get any closer to identifying how big the bomb factory actually was. Are we to infer that it was in fact *not* massive but *seemed* so to those at the time? If so, to what extent does this appearance effect – or even lead to – specific actions? Can we say that while it wasn’t objectively massive, the fact that so many people thought it was led to it being effectively and operatively so? As with the siege, access to the ultimate reality of events – if ever possible – involves negotiating a swathe of possible narratives and a host of variable contexts.

2. Struggling Authors

If the presence of multiple perspectives raises the possibility of antagonistic and/or contradictory accounts of the same events, it also brings to the fore the question of power with regard to the individuals, entities or institutions who seek to act as author and gather up those perspectives into a single account. We will see later in this chapter how Sorrentino addresses his own method of doing just this in his “Author’s Note,” but we will first look at how the novel itself features a number of would-be authors who all fail to narrate events in which they are involved because of their inability to deal with a multiplicity of perspectives.

Sorrentino suggests that the gaps between the collection of individual viewpoints and any proposed unifying narrative are attractive to – and natural homes of – conspiracy theories because they promise to explain the deeper significance of individual events (that might seem coincidental or unrelated to each other) by extrapolating outwards from them to larger patterns. Part of the reason such theories are able to do this is by taking advantage of the unfortunate reality that even a singular perspective – or life – is not immediately, if ever, intelligible as a seamless narrative. Rather they are open to endless revision and alteration, and any number of combinations of their component parts. As Lionel Congreaves, a leader of a prison education program who finds himself embroiled in all kinds of rumours about his involvement with CIA front companies and the SLA, puts it, “[t]he fact of the matter was that anyone’s life had a series of unknowable holes in it that, if you were resourceful and persistent ... you could pack with allegations and lies” (186). Congreaves finds this is exactly what has happened to him, and he collects these rumours and allegations about himself with “a certain bleak pleasure” (180). While the stories might be wildly inaccurate, Congreaves finds that that doesn’t mean they don’t have agency in the world because they operate in the “murky areas in which [the SLA’s] activities and his own gave the appearance of intersection” (179). This section of *Trance* is entitled “Lionel Congreaves Explains the Current Situation” (177), and the title’s irony turns on the fact that while Congreaves does ‘explain’ – i.e.: connect – a series of events, that explanation only reveals the possibility of any number of alternative explanations, and in so doing further obfuscates the reality presumed (hoped?) to lie underneath. The section oscillates between Congreaves’ weary frustration at the plain silliness and lack of internal logic of some of the rumours – one involves “internecine war” (188) between two people who are both allegedly CIA operatives – and his trickster-ish indulgence of their possibility: he not only “admit[s] to some embellishment of his personal résumé,” claiming that “[e]veryone fudged a little, here and there,” but to his own question “what was it that would constitute an allegation that had some basis?” he answers, cheekily: “An excellent and thought-provoking question, indeed” (179). In “explaining the current situation,” then, Congreaves merely serves to obscure it further. As he remarks of a document in his collection of rumours, he is “revealing and concealing in equal measure” (189). Indeed, Congreaves manages to make the distinction between appearance and reality a requisite not just of those with a commitment to the difference between truth and falsity but also of obfuscation. He does this by tying it to the desire of the conspiracist, a figure whose desire to sift ‘what really happened’ from the presented story implies a hard distinction between them, but a

figure whose narrative intent serves to further obscure and obfuscate by creating a larger intersecting pattern out of isolated events. A further distinction is set up, then, one that Sorrentino himself will return to in his “Author’s Note,” namely the difference between the basic facts and the interpretations of the meanings of those facts in the form of a narrative.

This distinction is present in the series of thirteen rumours about Congreaves’ involvement at the intersection of the CIA and the SLA which work according to three characteristics: the assumption that coincidences are not really coincidences at all; leaps in logic which assume that two events alike in kind but in different spheres of action are actually connected, rather than just similar; the hoovering up of loose ends through the application of the ‘conclusions’ of those leaps in logic to events that had previously seemed outlying or inconsistent. The first rumour, for instance, asks whether the broad geographical proximity between the Delaware company he worked for in Vietnam and the CIA’s headquarters in Langley, Virginia is more than just a coincidence. In other words – are these isolated facts or is there a narrative connection between them? The second rumour answers this in favour of the latter, suggesting that such proximity is *due to* Congreaves’ company providing “state-of-the-art torture chambers, interrogation centers, and other places of detainment” for the CIA for use in “eliminat[ing] Vietcong sympathizers” (180). Such distinctions mark the series of rumours that follow, in which apparently isolated facts are made to appear connected through a tenuous ‘logic’ that precedes the facts. The third rumour suggests that if the company helped the CIA abroad, it must have done so at home, too. The need to include certain persons in this story (the members of the SLA in the rest of the novel) requires extra jumps and inferences, so that the form of Congreaves’ company’s domestic help involved setting up his prison education program and peopling it with white girls (specifically Yolanda and Tania) who would be attractive to black convicts. Once the key players – the convicts and educators who form the SLA, Congreaves himself – have been gathered together, the conspiracy can continue by attributing active direction (and authorship) of particular actions to Congreaves. This is done, as before, by replacing coincidence with causation, so the story is able to say that not only are Congreaves and these future members of the SLA found in the same place (the prison education program), but that is because Congreaves engineered the link in his role as a CIA “control officer” (181) (rumours six and seven). This is then used to explain loose ends – so rumour eight asserts that it was in the prison education program that Tania met her lover in the SLA. And then the leap that characterized the relationship between rumours one and two is made again, asserting that if Congreaves was responsible for all of this, then he must have been

responsible for other things too. This ‘logical’ supposition is used to ‘explain’ specific facts, like the murder of the progressive Oakland superintendent of schools that has bemused even the Left (the explanation being that it discredits the Left as a whole, which is the CIA’s aim in infiltrating/creating the SLA in the first place). Again, loose ends are hoovered up in rumour eleven, this time ‘explaining’ apparent incongruities in the reports of Alice/Tania’s kidnapping, before another jump in logic (though this time contradictory to all the others) hoovers up another few loose ends (rumour twelve), before a final ‘explanation’ is offered that suggests that it is “because of the concatenation of all the alleged circumstances enumerated above [in the preceding twelve rumours]” (182) that further specific events have happened.

This particular series is revealed to be Congreaves’ own preferred version from the “endless permutations” available to him (183). But if he “ha[s] decided that this particular arrangement form[s] a nice, coherent chronology of innuendo,” he also acknowledges that it is a “humorous miscellany of ridiculousness” (183). In other words, this particular connection of these rumours – collated from different sources given Congreaves’ description of them as a “collection” (179) – does, at least in terms of the requirements of narrative logic, contain a certain plausibility, but it is also “plainly” ridiculous and “contradictory” (183). If this is a recapitulation of the distinction between the connective requirements of narrative and the reality of specific, isolated events, then Sorrentino here understands this distinction – and the conspiracy theories that find their place in the gap created by it – firstly as an inevitable result of one person trying to construct a narrative about events with multiple strands and involving many different individuals (from both the perspective of the rumour-mongers and Congreaves himself), and secondly as an initiator of any number of other possible narratives of equal ‘validity’ where the contradictions are either solved, reduced or transferred to other areas, or, at their extremity, seen as evidence of the reality of conspiracy.

The SLA, meanwhile, particularly Tania, find it hard to reconcile multiplicity and singularity on the level of vocabulary. For the SLA, and Teko especially, disseminating the SLA’s message is as much a question of genre as it is of ideology. Although they claim that their misgivings about Guy Mock’s book suggestion are due to the compromise of their revolutionary ideals that will ensue (because it can be seen to be both financially and intellectually ‘cashing in’ on their notoriety), such misgivings actually issue from their desire to maintain control over their message. They are suspicious that Mock, who really

does have ulterior motives, will somehow transform their idealized revolutionary tract – “It would be like *Prairie Fire*” (253) – into a more traditional narrative. For the SLA, especially after the siege, their desire to enter into history is inseparable from how their story is presented: how events will be linked together, what meaning will be given to those events, and crucially in what company that narrative will be placed becomes paramount. This latter is really a question of genre: for a SLA seen as a “joke” (139) by the rest of the Left, their concern is firstly to convince their desired comrades of their legitimacy through the creation of a narrative that conforms to its literary canon. Strangely, though, they are “completely indifferent to literary matters, to questions of style, flavour, pacing, wit, and spontaneity” (311):

Here is the way Teko decides that they will do things differently: They will work out questions ahead of time, with as little assistance from Trout as possible, and then fabricate appropriate answers to them on paper. These scripts will be recorded, then retranscribed, and then the transcripts scrutinized to identify and correct any inconsistencies between the statements provided by the SLA three ... to firm up and clarify matters of political dogma and philosophy, and to begin to shape the interviews toward the desired end, a finished book. In short, an assembly line approach, precise and controlled.

This precision does not extend to the formal matters – style, flavour, pacing, wit, spontaneity – noted by Mock’s assistant Adam Trout above. Rather they aim to control their story through a machinic process that relies on the centralization of word choice as the instrument of persuasion. Thus Tania ponders over the nature of her experience: “So many choices. Was she kidnapped, rescued, liberated, or saved? Was she converted, rehabilitated, reeducated, or transformed? Is she a freedom fighter, a revolutionary, an insurgent, an urban guerrilla?” (302). If this shows, at least from Teko’s point of view, an admirable attention to detail, it does not result in the exercise in certainty he tries to manhandle the process into being. Instead, such close attention to language becomes for Tania an exercise in doubt – this selection of words alone allows for at least four versions of her story.

For Tania, this overflow of words – and the fact that they could all be used, to a certain extent, to tell a plausible narrative – leads her to question the very possibility of telling her story. This is made formally explicit in Sorrentino’s depiction of her interview with Trout.

He divides the depiction of the conversation into what she says officially, onto Trout's tape recorder – what she is *allowed* to answer, within “the parameters of the “Tania Interview” as established by Teko and Yolanda” (302) – and a set of questions and thoughts that sometimes seem to be Trout's and sometimes Tania's own of herself. As the interview goes on, Tania develops a clearer and more explicit internal monologue that eventually distinguishes itself from Trout's questions. In this way, the interview proceeds through the gradual establishment of a variety of perspectives on Tania's experience.

The first demarcation is between Trout as questioner and Tania as subject. Trout asks whether she loved her family and she answers with the SLA party line: “The media knowingly spreads propaganda lies regarding how close my family is” (302). She then develops this into a critique of the ideological state apparatuses of class and school. After this, though, comes the first instance of a refrain that will appear five times in the four-and-a-half-page interview: “Does this make sense?” (303). This question is unattributed – it doesn't seem consistent with Trout's line of questioning, but as it appears without quotation marks (unlike what she says on the tape) and without the “She says” (302) that precedes her other utterances, it isn't clearly Tania's either. Furthermore, it is not focalized through another character's point of view (there is no other character in the scene) and so it lies, unclaimed, acting as a general address to the reader from the text, though not from any narrator. A more existential question, it is unclear what the “this” it refers to: what Tania herself says, Trout's questions, the interview itself, or something larger, Tania's presence in the SLA, for instance, or even the cultural atmosphere of America as a whole.

As we saw in the extract concerning the bomb factory, overtly fictionalizing – or at least what might be described as ‘flowery’ language – enters the novel. If “Who is she now? Is the SLA her family?” (303) are questions seemingly consistent with the interview, these slip into more florid descriptive passages that suggest the entrance of a more distanced narrative voice: “Hadrn't she already, in effect, chosen ... by choosing to live, out of wedlock, in genteel though hardly luxurious circumstances with Eric Stump? [her pre-kidnap fiancé]” (303). Yet while it might be considered distanced, the description “genteel though hardly luxurious” seems to bespeak personal experience, suggesting that these words might in some way be Tania's. This impression is confirmed after two interview answers and a further instance of the “Does this make sense?” refrain, when the questioning voice takes on the undeniable air of personal memory: “Was there anything

that she hated on that day, anything that she felt other than the most delicious sense of triumph watching Eric's face tighten as he convulsed with his orgasm?" (303).

Once this tone has been introduced, despite the passage's brief reversion back to Trout's questions and her taped answers, its individual, personal emphasis appears to usher in the possibility of many different narratives of Tania's experience: one in which she was naïve and stupid ("Does she actually not understand that she was the "rich bitch" who might get killed?" [304]); one which takes issue with her political effectiveness ("Has her conversion in any real way relieved the plight of the poor?" [304]); one where even her membership of the SLA fails to prevent her from being afforded the privileges of the class position she now rejects ("Is it not clear to her that she is not just anyone's child?" [305]); one in which her new political commitment instils a lack of humanity ("How effortful could it have been to "rouse public sympathy" for suffering parents?" [305]); and one in which she is not straightforward with herself about her reasons for joining the SLA ("Is it really self-honesty that causes a person to seek common ground with the people who threaten to kill her?" [304], "What might have brought about the change, other than some form of coercion?" [305]).

Against the monotonous repetition of what "She says" (302, 303, 304, 305) on the tape – a statement that simultaneously suggests verifiable reality and implies doubt: '*So she says...*' – Sorrentino sets a swirl of possible other versions, but, following the latter implication of the phrase, even the party line that goes onto the tape becomes subject to insinuations of other realities. If Trout's questions imply she was in love with fellow SLA member Cujo, she responds that it is "bourgeois" that the "pig media ... could not recognize that it was the People with whom I was falling in love" (305). Nevertheless, this is belied by a series of statements prefaced with an accumulative "And" (305):

She says, "He was very patient with me. He answered all my ignorant questions, knowing that I was growing and changing under his attention."

And, "I had a lot of positive and strong feelings for him before my acceptance as a member of the cell.

And, "Cujo was patient, loving, devoted, enthusiastic, and passionate."

And, "Cujo was beautiful, gentle, kind, and tender."

And, "Cujo was strong, brave, resolute, and unhesitant." (305)

If these recorded statements do not already suggest that she lied – or was at least disingenuous – about her relationship with Cujo, she is forced to explicitly deny such a relationship as a reason for their separation into different cells: “It was definitely *not* because we were in love” (306). The voice that asks “Does that make sense?” now registers a skeptical “Hmmm” (306).

After this unfocalized note, the questioning voice takes up Tania’s internal monologue again, and explicitly considers the tension between what she is allowed to say on the tape and what she feels, and the difficulties – perhaps impossibilities – of ever telling her story accurately: “Must she deny him even now? Or is it simply easier? What would it cost her to attempt to describe the intricacy of her feelings concerning this brief and intense affair? To reveal the stubborn, continuing effort to camouflage the political infelicity of love as another form of radical camaraderie?” (306) This proves the catalyst for the questioning voice to break off into Tania’s stream of consciousness on the one hand, and, as an interrupting presence, the unattributed voice that seems somewhere between the external observer (possibly Trout) and the access to personal information that suggested it might be Tania’s:

Oh, Cujo. 6’4” freckles stupid peaked cap the mustache that wouldn’t grow Stump he said Stump had a mustache dumb-dumb jealous of Stump! that smile of his gone belt buckle in the newspaper photo pigs standing over that crushed pile of ashes and bone “beyond recognition” with his belt buckle there she spotted it and who got the monkey? –

How frequently does she reach up to touch that stone monkey nestled in the hollow of her throat?

– And what about her other feelings? (306)

Here, then, towards the end of the interview, Tania’s internal division about her experience fragments into a less explicitly narrative-based language. Although we can make out certain narrative elements – she remembers Cujo, who had a moustache, and who was jealous of Tania’s fiancé, and how he is now dead – it is made up of isolated images that aren’t (or cannot be) linked in a fully comprehensible way; if events are indeed related, we see here how Tania finds it difficult to incorporate all her “other feelings” into a coherent narrative. It is the specific act of narrating one’s story that she finds difficult. It is at this point that “she begin[s] to lose her enthusiasm for the interview process,” aware that the

“various interlinear and marginal interpolations and emendations” are “remote from her real preoccupations” (306). Subject to others’ authoring intentions over her story, and unable to fashion control over it herself, the interview breaks down into a series of twenty-nine questions that read both as an interviewer’s and as those “many questions” that “proffer themselves” (302) at the beginning of her attempt to narrate her experience. That these questions go “unanswered, like prayers” (307) suggests that no God-like authorial figure is forthcoming.

3. Postmodernism, the Collective Novel, and the Author’s Note

The SLA find themselves subject to the (hostile) authorial intentions of others; Lionel Congreaves accepts that there are “endless permutations” linking up the rumours about his involvement in the SLA and CIA; Tania is aware of the various stories she could create through particular combinations of word choices and that certain emphases – political, personal – might be narratively incompatible while nonetheless required for an accurate story. A central concern of *Trance*, then, is the place of the individual in historical events, and more specifically how those individuals narrate their own experience when that experience is subject to other possible narrations. If at times the novel seems to identify in its struggling authors an excessive assertion of subjectivity, for which *Trance*’s lack of singular protagonist is some kind of counterbalance,⁴⁰ on occasion it also introduces a narrative tone which refuses character subjectivity through the use of a passive voice. In this respect it is quite different from another recent novel which covers almost exactly the same historical ground and set of characters, Susan Choi’s *American Woman* (2003), which maintains an individual focus throughout and is, for Andrew Hoberek, an example of the “middle-class realism” (236) epitomized by Choi and her contemporary Jhumpa Lahiri or by John Updike in years past. The differences between *Trance* and *American Woman* are forcefully displayed in the novels’ respective portrayals of the FBI’s discovery of (appropriately enough) a ball of newspaper bearing a set of fingerprints belonging to Teko (Juan in *American Woman*) stuffed into a mattress in a farmhouse formerly occupied by the SLA as a hideout. In *Trance*, this ball of newspaper enters the narrative at the point it is discovered by the FBI. Conversely, in *American Woman* it is not only introduced much earlier, when the SLA are still at the farmhouse, but we actually witness the act of

⁴⁰ At times, the novel seems to take some lessons from the collective novel of the 1930s. In its portrayal of a wide range of characters it at points resembles John Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*, although Sorrentino’s novel’s narrative voice is, as we have seen, more promiscuous.

stuffing it into the mattress as part of a larger sub-story about the Patty Hearst-figure Pauline's ill-equipment as a fugitive (141). The newspaper appears another time before the FBI's discovery of it (something which doesn't happen in *Trance*) when on leaving the house, Jenny Shimada (Joan Shimada in *Trance*) uncovers the hole. This moment provides an example of the subjective emphasis of Choi's novel. Hurt by Pauline's accusation of "moral absolutism" (216), Jenny searches the house for a missing part of the car she needs to escape the farmhouse and avoid taking part in an armed robbery the SLA are planning. It is her reaction to this accusation – defensive because it hit a nerve, aggressive because she *is* absolutely certain that "[a]rmed robbery was simply wrong" (216) – that leads to her finding "the patch that she'd made on the underside [of the mattress], eons ago" (217). Time here – in this word "eons" – is entirely subjective and individualized; "eon" is not a word that describes a particular amount of time (the OED defines it as "an immeasurable period of time" ["Aeon"]) so much as an individual's feeling that time is stretching out. The temporal experience being described is the narrativization of one's own life, complete with this subjective experience of time.

Although in *Trance* the discovery of the newspaper is focalized through a named FBI agent – Silliman – he and it are depicted as part of a much larger operation. If Silliman, like Jenny, reflects on temporal experience, it is because he has to wait for other parts of the operation – over which he has no control – to arrive, in the form of trained dogs on a "chartered flight from California" (373). There is no reflection on personal time here, and on the whole Silliman has very little individual agency; instead he feels like the case has descended on him: "He went to bed one night a spectator and awoke – was awoken, actually – the next morning, engulfed. A weird feeling. He's followed the whole thing in the papers and on the news. It's the Bureau's case, but it seemed to have little to do with anything he knows" (374). Here, if *Trance* allows us a certain amount of insight into Silliman's subjective experience, it is done in order to show us an experience characterized by a lack of agency and Silliman's submission to larger institutional systems like the media and the FBI which leave him a "spectator" and follower of a case that suddenly engulfs him. Even his sleep pattern is controlled by external entities: he didn't wake up, he "was awoken, actually." Even when reflecting on the SLA's hatred of the government, he feels "he can assure these kids that any conceivable alternative would have men just like him, doing just what he does, at its heart" (374). This centrality does not come accompanied by power; his importance lies in his willingness to be a cog in the machine, the element of the government that makes the grand pronouncements of the SLA seem misguided. If the

government is just made up of ordinary people like Silliman, he is also an exemplary character in Sorrentino's novel: an individual with limited agency, enmeshed in a system larger than himself.

Thus the discovery of the newspaper itself is de-personalized. It is not Silliman himself who finds it, but rather "an investigator," who "comes into the room holding a bag containing a folded, crumpled section of newspaper" (375). If we can presume that this investigator is the one who found the newspaper, *Trance* doesn't feel that information is necessary. Rather the novel notes in the passive voice that the newspaper "has been discovered stuffed into a hole in the underside of one of the mattresses upstairs" (375). The salient information is that a clue has been found, a possible object with which to trace the revolutionaries; less salient is who found it and what they might have been thinking when they did, or what thoughts its discovery initiated in them. Instead, its value is judged – "That's a good find. That looks promising" (375) – and it is sent off to the lab for inspection. The owner of the fingerprints found on the newspaper is also de-personalized, their name withheld, their identity reduced to a piece of ethnic profiling: the lab, contacting Silliman, notes that although there is "[n]o match as yet ... the prints display the frequent whorls characteristically found on persons of Oriental origin" (375). If the reader knows this is Joan, the novel never names her. Nevertheless, while this kind of narrative passivity acts in this instance as a communicant of a collectivity – albeit a disempowering one – *Trance* as a whole does not argue for a singular response to the problems found in individual narration of personal-yet-collective experience, nor does it take on wholesale the form of the collective novel. This is either surprising or unsurprising, depending on your point of view: the former because we have seen how problematic multiplicity is made to be in the novel, the latter because the kind of narrative passivity described above is open to all sorts of criticisms familiar from poststructuralism, namely that it leads to a conception of an omniscient God-like figure with mastery over the entirety of the action. Instead, how *Trance* addresses this problem is more complicated, and we can approach it with the help of Lydia Galton, Alice/Tania's mother, who, musing on the effect on her daughter of her media infamy, gives conceptual weight to the novel's title:

Day after day in the newspapers, on the television. You lose something. You become a reflection, all detail and very little depth. It's as if she's in a trance, the glowing replica of every living soul's fears and wishes, mute and impenetrable ... She is exactly what they say she is. When her presence no longer is required on the

television and in the papers, the day she stops, perhaps she will have come to herself.
But I know that the girl she comes to won't be the one we knew. (461)

If, in Lydia's eyes, Alice's daily presence in the mediascape has led her to "lose something" by becoming a "reflection" of others' "fears and wishes," what she has lost – in addition to a self or an identity – is the solidity of historicity. "She is exactly what they say she is" suggests that, like Mary in *Eat the Document*, in becoming a fugitive she has been forced to abandon her history and submit to becoming a fictional subject. While Mary at least chose the contours of this new identity and was able, to a certain extent, to give it a history, Alice/Tania loses all control entirely. If the "very little depth" reminds us of Fredric Jameson's famous analyses of the postmodern lack of historicity, then the "all detail" seems in this context to refer less to that found in an extended continuous narrative than the close-focus detail of an isolated moment devoid of context. Detail in this case is not the necessary myth-breaking specificity of historicization but the superficial irrelevancies dredged up by the televisual culture which Lydia derides. Furthermore, Lydia knows that the media's interest in her daughter will only be temporary, albeit one with lasting effects: Alice will not be the same person she was before. Trance is a perfectly apposite word: according to the OED, it is a "prolonged suspension of consciousness" in which one exists in a "state of mental abstraction from external things" ("Trance"). In other words, Alice/Tania exists in a differentiated state in which she is unable to acknowledge or respond to her place in time and history, her agency restricted. In this context, that she cannot narrate her experience is unsurprising. If this experience is itself temporary, she will nonetheless not be able to tell of it; it is this inability that Lydia points to as the irrevocable change.

There are a number of implications to this. Lydia seems to see the long sixties as a kind of historical aberration. Coming from a perspective such as hers – part of the establishment, relatively conservative – this is unsurprising. In *The Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank quotes the conservative view of the sixties relayed to a journalist called Fred Barnes by Newt Gingrich at a point after the 1994 mid-term elections when the Republicans had taken the House of Representatives for the first time since 1952:

the 1960s represent a crucial break, "a discontinuity." From 1607 down till 1965, "there is a core pattern to American history. Here's how we did it until the Great Society messed everything up: don't work, don't eat; your salvation is spiritual; the

government by definition can't save you; governments are into maintenance and all good reforms are into transformation." Then, "from 1965 to 1994, we did strange and weird things as a country. Now we're done with that and we have to recover. The counterculture is a *momentary aberration* in American history that will be looked back upon as a quaint period of Bohemianism brought to the national elite" (2-3, my emphasis).

Along with this political and cultural anger, Lydia exhibits a bewilderment at these "strange and weird things" similar to that of her contemporary Swede Levov in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997); like him, she sees "fury ... violence [and] desperation," a kind of "American berserk" (86). But if it is an aberration, it will nonetheless cause an irrevocable change that will remain difficult, or perhaps impossible, to narrate fully. Yet while Lydia is bemused by the events and the culture surrounding her, it is an eloquent bemusement, and one in which Sorrentino, like many of his peers ("US authors writing in the wake of postmodernism" [2011, 392] as Adam Kelly puts it) "addresse[s] ... the problem of historicizing the postmodern" (2011, 392). Kelly notes that for these authors, doing this means "understand[ing that] the world depicted by postmodern fiction ... [is] itself historical, [is] the outcome of a historical process" and as such is "capable of historical understanding" (2011, 399), but for Lydia such understanding is fraught with incomprehension. "*Where had the world gone?*" she laments (364, Sorrentino's emphasis), before trying to express the particular character of her confusion:

Her nostalgia was not only out of place but out of style as well. The young people had their own synthetic nostalgia: a television show, *Happy Days*; a Broadway musical, *Grease*; and a movie, *American Graffiti*, all of which concerned a sentimental 1950s past. Men, women, and children alike seemed to accept these spectacles as the truth of the era, its absolute limit ... This was the first time Lydia could remember when there seemed to be a strong communal will to reverse the clock, an attempt beyond nostalgia actually to construct a living imitation of the past from the shinier and more durable pieces of its debris and then to dwell in it. There was of course the inconvenience of people her own age, not to mention the thousands still walking the earth who could vividly recall something as distant as the last century. While the conventional take on the ascendancy of *Happy Days* etc. was that these diversions provided an "escape" from the "perplexing" "reality" of a "turbulent" era, Lydia had little doubt that around the 1990s there would be a television comedy

all about the trigger-happy days of the seventies. All this would be funny in the distant future! (365)

Here the familiar tension between newness or change and tradition and succession (which we will explore in more depth in the final chapter's discussion of David Foster Wallace) is present in the form of Lydia's distinction between the "synthetic nostalgia" and the real historical memory found in "people her own age." This is the 'generation gap' seen from the older side; Lydia is suggesting that the younger generation – i.e.: that of the counterculture and the New Left – do not possess a properly historical memory, but rather operate on the distorted kind offered by the newly emergent mass media.⁴¹

Lydia's dismissal of the "conventional take" on the "ascendancy" of this kind of empty nostalgia appears to contradict her view of the trance her daughter is in, suggesting instead that these sitcoms are manifestations of a wider logic. Yet she is careful to separate the "era" itself – which is temporary – from its effects (the sitcoms) – which are lasting. Rather than contradicting her earlier arguments, then, this passage actually furthers them: if the sixties in its immediate character is temporary, but the changes it bestows on Alice/Tania – and American culture at large – more lasting, among which is the inability to narrate the period itself, that inability comes from that period's lack of real historical memory and its erasure of individuals' awareness of historicity. Lydia envisions an ahistorical future in which people will engage in a permanent cycle of illusory retrospection, concerned with representations of past eras rather than their realities. If the ascendancy of programs like *Happy Days* is less about the 1950s than the 1970s, the historical period of that ascendancy – the sixties and seventies – is the key piece of information; in short, she envisions a postmodern future that, employing a familiar anticipation of retrospection, will have been born in the 1960s.

Perhaps, though, we have been wrong to talk about the difficulty of assigning a singular

⁴¹ Sorrentino himself expressed similar sentiments in a 1996 piece for a special issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* entitled "The Future of Fiction," edited by David Foster Wallace. He wrote: "There's also the possibility that in a society as deracinated and stripped of tradition and continuity - by jet travel, the automobile, the interstate highway system, corporate relocations, urban sprawl (i.e., white flight), chain stores, divorce, staggering incarceration rates, etc. - as our own, the void that emptily exists where common experience would ordinarily repose is filled by elements of popular culture so anchored to a specific time that they become part. of the lingua franca, staples of the manufactured conversation, endlessly in medias res, that takes the place of shared heritage. In effect, trends in television, movies, and popular music and fake nostalgia for their various incarnations are our shared conscious heritage" (1996, 92).

interpretation – and with it a meaning – to particular events as a problem. Or, rather, we should clarify for whom it is a problem. It is by no means clear that it is a problem for Sorrentino himself, even if his characters find it frustrating. Indeed, in an interview with Michael Silverblatt for KCRW radio's *Bookworm*, Sorrentino, the son of postmodernist writer Gilbert Sorrentino, acknowledged that he has “never seen any reason to oppose [his] father's aesthetic, or, his multiple aesthetics” that come from his conception of the work of art as having, as Silverblatt puts it, a “uselessness in the face of life” (KCRW). Talking around the issue of postmodern fiction, Sorrentino rejects readings of that fiction – his father's being the given example – as “difficult,” “affectless,” “self-indulgent,” “cold” or “heartless” (KCRW). If, then, Sorrentino appears to use Lydia as a mouthpiece for a denigration of certain aspects of postmodernity – the distortive effects of mass media, ahistoricism, nostalgia – that doesn't necessarily imply a similar critique on Sorrentino's part of what are thought to be the characteristics of postmodern fiction. Indeed, if, as Mark Currie has summarized, postmodern novels “raise questions for the philosophy of history, or problems for the reality or the knowability of the past” and “draw attention to the artificiality of historical representations, or to the narrative devices that give shape to historical material” (2011, 3) then *Trance* seems to fall into that category. It is of course true that all the novels considered in this thesis do this to a greater or lesser extent, but it might be equally true to say that they understand questions of artificiality and difficulty as more problematic than Sorrentino does.⁴² It is useful, then, that Sorrentino directly addresses these issues in his “Author's Note” included at the end of the novel.

In this Note, Sorrentino seems to be entering into a conversation with Norman Mailer about the novel's relationship to history. When the SLA turn against Mock, it is in part because he can find only Trout – and not Mailer, Thompson, or Wolfe – to help him. When Trout arrives, Yolanda is found “cursing and throwing empty bottles into the trash. “Norman *Mailer*, he said, god damn it!”” (301, Sorrentino's emphasis). These two unrealized projects – Mock's and Mailer's – suggest that like Congreaves', the account of the SLA has different “permutations,” even if they are less “endless” than the latter's rumours. If Mailer's ‘presence’ in the book helps give the strand of the novel that features Mock's attempts to write his book a larger scope – one concerned with the relationship

⁴² This seems to set up a conversation between Sorrentino and Wallace, who found the mediated nature of contemporary culture to be responsible for all sorts of ills. Interestingly however, in the *Bookworm* interview, Sorrentino views Wallace favourably as a writer who is part of a tradition of experimental fiction, as opposed, say, to a writer using the cultural language of postmodernism to critique postmodernism.

between fiction and history – it is hard not to think of Mailer when one reads the first line of Sorrentino’s Note: “Fiction based on real events always risks appearing to be coy about its proximity to the actual, whether or not its author hews closely to the facts” (515). In *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, Mailer described his rationale for the dual structure of his book in language Sorrentino seems to be echoing:

the first book can be, in the formal sense, nothing but a personal history which while written as a novel was to the best of the author’s memory scrupulous to facts, and therefore a document; whereas the second, while dutiful to all newspaper accounts, eyewitness reports, and historic inductions available, while even obedient to a general style of historical writing, at least up to this point, while even pretending to be a history (on the basis of its introduction) is finally now to be disclosed as some sort of condensation of a collective novel – which is to admit that an explanation of the mystery of the events at the Pentagon cannot be developed by the methods of history – only by the instincts of a novelist. (1994, 255)

Mailer’s reference to the collective novel of the 1930s reminds us that American literature has addressed these problems before, when the focus on an individual character was jettisoned in favour of a broader scope. Those instances were also characterized by an acknowledgement of the difficulties presented by the desire to create collective stories, and by various suggestions for a formal solution to those problems. Barbara Foley has seen John Steinbeck’s demarcation of “general” and “particular” chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and the way John Dos Passos “maintains ontological distinctions among the various components of his narrative” (434) in the *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930-36) as instances of this. Here, Mailer dismisses the fact that “journalistic information ... is so incoherent, inaccurate, contradictory, malicious, even based on error” (1994, 255) as a minor point in favour of a larger one, which we will come to, but it is worth noting beforehand that Sorrentino finds similar issues with the historical record of the SLA:

Many, if not most, of the sources dealing directly with the SLA that I reviewed ... attempt to present factual accounts from a journalistic perspective. While these accounts provided a vivid glimpse of the mid-1970s ... they’ve suffered from the passage of time in all the usual ways. Facts have been superseded by newer and more influential facts. The authors frequently bring to their material oddly insistent personal agendas, at once both tangential to and entangled with the larger subject,

that persuasively demonstrated to me the narcotic allure of the SLA/Tania story and the ways in which people relate certain public events to their private lives. (515-6)

If, for Mailer, so-called factual accounts often turn out to be “false” (1994, 255), for Sorrentino this is because they are exaggerated, tangential, or, as he remarks of one book, “careen ... into the personal” (516). In response to this overflow of subjectivity, however, Sorrentino doesn’t assert a higher objectivity, or adopt en masse the passive voice we saw in the Silliman extract, but rather invokes “the novelist’s right” (515):

I have disregarded the record whenever it’s served my purpose to do so. Among many adulterations, I have, strictly according to my own lights, emphasized, diminished, conflated, and omitted incidents and individuals; I have frequently invented characters and incidents altogether; and I have occasionally changed the chronology of events and consciously indulged in anachronisms. I have freely invented documents, newspaper articles, and the like (515)

If Sorrentino here asserts a freedom and authority belonging to him as the author, and that role affords him a certain amount of agency, Mailer’s response is to reach for other kinds of individual perspective, not that of the author but those of participants in historical events. His larger point, then, is that

history is interior – no documents can give sufficient intimation: the novel must replace history at precisely that point where experience is sufficiently emotional, spiritual, psychical, moral, existential, or supernatural to expose the fact that the historian in pursuing the experience would be obliged to quit the clearly demarcated limits of historic inquiry. (1994, 255)

Mailer sets up the two halves of his book as follows: a “personal history” and a “collective novel.” Both are characterized by a tension between the apparently subjective (“personal”, “novel”) and the objective claims of genre and scope (“history”, “collective”). If the first is ‘true,’ it is only one person’s – Mailer’s – truth; the second, even if it is a novel that tries its hardest to be a history by taking on the style and objectives of historical writing, is characterized by the imaginative work of the novelist – the rendering of consciousnesses other than one’s own. For Mailer, then, history as a discipline misunderstands its subject. On Sorrentino’s part, if his acknowledgement of the “actual” and “real” status of this

“well-documented episode in recent American history” (515) initially suggests a fairly strict separation of the world of historical events and the enterprise of fiction, the notion of separation becomes less an absolute marker between two genres and more a principle of narrative independence. For Sorrentino, the novelist’s license is used not to pick up history’s subjective slack so much as to offer, with the appropriate caveats, a narrative *less coy* about its objectives and identity: if the historical accounts Sorrentino has consulted appeal to the objectivity associated with the discipline of history, even while they veer into personal reflections, *Trance*, the Note claims, is honest about its fictional status. As Sorrentino warns: “Seekers of documentary truth are gently encouraged to look elsewhere” (516). Yet if this fictional acknowledgement releases him to make “many adulterations” to the record, those early doubts about the record’s objectivity suggest that the record already bore the signs of the kinds of license he claims for the novelist (as Mailer suggests). While the Note’s early lines suggest that fiction operates in one sphere and the “actual” is part of another, the historical record now seems nearer the fictional sphere than that of “real events.” The distinction Sorrentino is making is less a formal than an ethical one: his fiction is honest about its status as fiction. Here Sorrentino’s less hostile attitude towards the attributes of so-called postmodern fiction becomes clear. The Note, from this perspective at least, seems to be, in Mark Currie’s words, “constructing an internal boundary between fiction and reality, which allows for reflection on the relation between fiction and reality, as well as the irony that both the fiction and the reality are, in the end, fictional” (2011, 2).

Yet “reality” and “the actual” are not necessarily the same thing, and while, as postmodern fiction tells us, reality is itself fictional, Sorrentino seems to make a distinction between this reality and a more fundamental “real.” In fact he never uses the word ‘reality,’ preferring instead to talk of “real events” and “the actual.” This, I want to suggest, is because Sorrentino holds a particular – and particularly un-postmodern – view of events in their barest sense. For to talk of diminishing the importance of one individual’s role and emphasizing another, and to talk of conflating two events or omitting another, a selection or a sort of palette of events and individuals must pre-exist those novelistic choices. Sorrentino seems to be suggesting that the historical record, or more particularly the facts which constitute it, remain the basic co-ordinates of his narrative no matter what he does to them. As Lionel Congreaves remarks of the basis for the rumours surrounding him: “he had made different claims to different people at different times. But the bare facts were the same, immutable” (179). In this light, Congreaves emerges as a mouthpiece for Sorrentino,

putting forth a vision of the fiction writer's role. "Real" or "actual" events are so because they are ontological anchor points that while temporally and spatially malleable – and even so in terms of meaning or significance – for novelistic purposes, cannot be entirely dispensed with. This isn't just using historical events as a start point from which to indulge in authorial invention, though. In an interview with George Plimpton, Truman Capote said of the documentary novel, by which he meant a "fictional novel suggested by fact," that it is an "impure genre ... which allows all the latitude of the fiction writer, but usually contains neither the persuasiveness of fact nor the poetic attitude fiction is capable of reaching" (Plimpton). Sorrentino's novel is not "suggested" by fact; rather he seems to separate the facts and the interpretation of those facts, understanding the events themselves as initiators of a selection of interpretations which are informed by "personal agendas" and perspectives. If the facts remain comparatively unchanged, access to them involves negotiating with the often distortive effect of the various interpretations of those events. Nevertheless, if at times – as we saw in the comparison with *American Woman – Trance* adopts something like the attitude of the collective novel, while the novelists of the 1930s used these techniques as a way to present a Marxist analysis of the totality, Sorrentino's version of the totality – if one can call it that – looks more like a collection of differing and sometimes competing narratives swirling around those base co-ordinate events. The category of the totality is placed in more doubt here than it is in those novels of the 1930s, while the historical record is distinguished more by a prominence accorded through a collective agreement that it tells us the truth than by any privileged position of explanation.⁴³

The status of 'the fact' thus has a curious position in Sorrentino's novel. While the basic events – the existence of the SLA, the kidnapping of an heiress, the bank robberies, the deaths – are untouched, his complaint that over the years "[f]acts have been superseded by newer and more influential facts" suggests that much which surrounds these events, and, we might argue, makes them important, operative, and initiatory of particular reactions and behaviours, is open to question, manipulation and recontextualization. Indeed, Sorrentino seems to be saying that the contextual network in which we interact with and interpret facts is constitutive of much of the meaning we take from them, and that this network is not simply constructed for us by external agents and factors but rather enters into the process

⁴³ Of course, the "collective" nature of this "agreement" is highly problematic, although I don't think here Sorrentino is particularly interested in the hierarchies of history for the simple reason that he doesn't have faith in the eventual recovery of 'what *really* happened' that those who point out such problems often have.

of interpretation and meaning. Hence why “opinions or hypotheses” proposed by a number of Sorrentino’s characters seem “entirely spurious when placed outside the invented context of the novel” (515). It is for this reason that although he dismisses the contemporary accounts of the Patty Hearst kidnapping for possessing what we might call a ‘local truth’ originating from being “written while the case was ongoing” (515), *Trance* is not an avowal of the benefits of retrospection. In the conception of the creation of historical narrative that Sorrentino outlines, temporal distance isn’t really any kind of distance at all, or at least one privileged over any other; rather it is the initiator of another set of contexts which in turn affect one’s analysis and interpretation. If context is ever-present, and if one does possess a certain amount of control over it, the nature of the literary enterprise entails the interaction with another context-bearing individual, the reader. Therefore, as Sorrentino acknowledges, “it should perhaps go without saying that both the relevancy of such matters [the events of his novel] and our way of thinking about them have drastically changed since I started writing in the fall of 2000” (616). The nexus of event and its context, the interpreter/author and their context, not to mention those of readers and other important parties, creates something in lieu of the Marxist totality in which it is difficult to create an intelligible narrative, to assert the distinction between one narrative and another, or to claim the primacy of one over another. This difficulty lies at the root of what initially looks like his traditional distinction between world and art. Sorrentino writes that “while many of the characters in this book have counterparts in real life, their actions, thoughts, beliefs, personalities, and, certainly, legal and moral culpability as depicted here are, finally, the product of an author’s imagination” (515). For Norman Mailer, this was the point where any attempt at a history breaks down into a novel, and he conceptualized the problem as one concerned with the outside and inside of individual consciousness. History does the former well while the novel should take over when it comes to depicting the emotional, spiritual, psychical and so on. This is the formal principle behind *The Armies of the Night*. Yet this isn’t quite the case with *Trance*; its “counterparts” are not the public perception of an individual and the interior reality, nor are they the historical personage and the novelistic invention, even if at times Sorrentino’s Note makes rather a show of separating those categories. His use of this word “counterparts” is a curious one because after one takes away the “actions, thoughts, beliefs, personalities” and “legal and moral culpability” from them, one is left wondering quite what remains of the link between them. I want to suggest that this statement is not really concerned with the relationship between characters in a novel and the real people those characters are based on, at least not in the terms of resemblance, accuracy and the limits of

co-extensiveness with which these questions are usually posed. In his use of the word “counterparts,” Sorrentino is, this time, not pointing to an ethical category so much as a formal – or perhaps a narratological – one. If *Trance* is one narrative of the Patty Hearst kidnapping and the historical record is another, both incorporate actors with similar roles in those narratives. Their similarity is to be found in their narrative function rather than any quality we can assign to a human being or a character. The OED defines a counterpart as a “person or thing not exactly similar to another, but serving as its equivalent in a different context” (“Counterpart”).

If *Trance* is peopled with characters concerned with asserting authorship over their narratives and staking claims for the accuracy of those narratives (with some asserting the primacy of theirs over another or all others), Sorrentino’s Note reveals *Trance*’s author to be subject to the same fears of interference as General Teko of the SLA. Rather than responding by asserting the superiority of his narrative, however, Sorrentino tries to protect its independence. Sorrentino’s distinction, then, is not that between history and the novel (his own comments notwithstanding), but that of his narrative from other narratives about the same events, be they history *or* novel. From this perspective, his statement that he “conducted no fieldwork, archival research, or interviews toward the completion of this book” (516) appears as an assertion of independence from other narratives. Yet that independence is conceived in the light of a kind of collectivity of equally independent narratives. The final ‘problem’ of multiplicity, then, is this: history is collectively made up of individual narratives fighting for independence. Perhaps appropriately, *Trance* leaves that problem standing. Given Sorrentino’s statements in the *Bookworm* interview, we might suggest that *Trance* feels less pressure than its peers to move away from characteristics associated with postmodern fiction, yet its assertion of what Lionel Congreaves calls the “immutable” “bare facts” seems to indicate more faith in an approachable ‘real’ than those postmodern predecessors. What still requires consideration, the novel implies, is the relationship between these bare facts and our narratives of them, and how those narratives themselves are subject to historical forces.

4.

Revolutionary Pastoral:

Lauren Groff's *Arcadia*

If Christopher Sorrentino uses the phrase “revolutionary pastoral” to title the section of *Trance* where the SLA hide out at an isolated farmhouse in upstate New York (193), the revolutionary potential found in a closer relationship to nature is the preoccupation of a number of recent long sixties novels which focus on the re-discovery of and reconnection with nature expressed in the “back to the land” movement and the growth of communes. T.C. Boyle’s *Drop City* (2003), for instance, takes its name from a real commune made from geodesic domes in Colorado. Boyle’s novel triangulates the desire to escape the prescribed life of suburbs with the depiction of naïve hippies rubbing up against the gruff outdoorspeople of remote Alaska when they move their commune north. The focus of this chapter, Lauren Groff’s 2012 novel *Arcadia*, does not have the counterbalancing philosophy of the conservative, unreconstructed hunters of the Alaskan wilderness that characterizes *Drop City*, and instead chooses to explore more fully the life-span of a commune called Arcadia. Its main interest is in the kinds of interactions between utopianism, myth, and temporal experience such a place engenders.

The first section, “City of the Sun,” which details the early, successful years of the Arcadia commune, is mainly set when Bit is “five years old” (5), identified as 1973 by Hannah’s reference to the “oil embargo” (54). The second, “Heliopolis,” which sees Arcadia expand its population but lose its ideals, is set when Bit is fourteen, in 1982, identified further by reference to a speech made by Ronald Reagan (87), while the third, “Isles of the Blest,” in which an adult Bit lives mournfully in New York City, his wife Helle having disappeared leaving him to raise their small daughter Grete alone, is set most likely in 2008, and refers to “the terrorist attacks on the city” of 11th September 2001 (189), protests against Guantanamo (192), and “the global downturn” of 2008 (207). The temporal setting of the fourth section, in which the globe has warmed to such an extent that the world’s land is shrinking and disease and famine encroach, is established by reference to an “anthology of 2018’s best” poetry (222). Yet while these are the initiatory temporal markers of the novel, deciding on the particularities of its structure – its guiding forms and preoccupations – remains difficult because a number of concerns are present at the same time. In terms of chronology, we move from the past, to the present, to an imagined future; in terms of genre from a pastoral, historical novel to one of contemporary disillusion (though not quite

realism), to a future with dystopian elements; in temporal terms, *Arcadia* places in question both the deep, cyclical sense of time often associated with the natural world and those conceptions of time which create an apocalyptic end-time, entangling both of these with various phenomena associated with the biblical – plagues, messiahs, destiny, the taming of the wilderness. In *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century*, Caren Irr suggests that

While ... an apocalyptic strain definitely fortifies twenty-first-century revolutionary fiction, the full-blown prophetic stance – complete with joy at the imminence of rapture for the saved and ominous predictions of locusts and plagues for the damned – rarely characterizes this writing. Entirely apocalyptic narratives ultimately abandon historical time in favour of the new temporality of the post-Judgment era, and a revolutionary novel committed to exploring and possibly explaining events in a particular time and place rarely makes such a final challenge to historiography (146)

It is true that *Arcadia* is not an “entirely apocalyptic” novel, nor does it feature (for the most part) a “full-blown prophetic stance,” but Irr’s last point is instructive because *Arcadia* embodies just such a “challenge to historiography” so “rare” in contemporary literature of this kind. *Arcadia* seeks to place on the same historical continuum an exploration of a past “time and place” and an imagined future threatened with human-made and natural versions of apocalypse. What is ultimately most interesting about Groff’s novel, then, is the extent to which it is able to make these various strands – historical novel, revolutionary novel, post-apocalyptic novel, pastoral novel – cohere.

1. Human, Nature, Time

Perhaps the first thing to note about *Arcadia* is the way nature undergirds the movements between times, genres and emphases. It is ever-present, thanks to a combination of Groff’s presentation of a natural world that asserts its presence so forcefully and constantly that one cannot ignore it and her depiction of the focalized protagonist Bit, who exhibits a heightened attention to nature’s details and subtleties. In this broad schema, nature has different roles and qualities.

Firstly, it is a criterion of beauty. In the first section of the novel, as the Arcadians gather to welcome their founder Handy back from a music tour, Bit’s attention is caught by a young

woman: “it strikes Bit with a sudden force that she is beautiful. With her brown bob and pointed chin, she is a chestnut come alive” (73). Note the absence of a simile or metaphor; she is not *like* a chestnut, she *is* one. This is something Groff does a lot in the novel, and here it implies two things. Firstly, it suggests that the barrier between nature and human is not fixed and insurmountable; that Arcadians, rather than being tied to their particular ontological category can in fact move between states, humans becoming animals becoming plants. If the book constantly likens humans to plants and animals, this more fluid implication is also repeatedly made in the first section: “In his sleep, the wind blowing through the forest becomes Hannah’s breath” (47); he “tells himself the story of the girl and her swan brothers” (49); “He pushes back the words that were already sickly until they die on the bitter part of his tongue. They send bad tendrils into his chest. They heap, a toad, in the cave of his throat” (51); “Helle’s eyes are open, yellow, in the dim. Tadpole of Handy, he thinks” (62); “He waits, but the woman only steps backward and becomes the woods again” (68). This fluid concept of being – what Handy describes as “*a feeling of oneness with the Universe*” (54, Groff’s emphasis) – along with the Arcadians’ desire to “live with the land, not on it” (14), aligns them with deep ecologists, who as Greg Garrard puts it in his book *Ecocriticism*, identify “the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, and demand [...] a return to a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere” (24). Indeed, this identification seems not only present in Bit’s impression of the woman, but an initiator of it. In other words, not only are humans at their most beautiful when they become nature, but they are un-identifiable as beautiful unless they are, in some way, nature: Bit’s realization of this woman’s beauty comes with the “sudden force” of his understanding of her identity as a chestnut. This identification (human and chestnut) and its meaning (both are beautiful) cannot be separated temporally. Bit does not have a prior conception of beauty as being like a chestnut and hoping to find someone that looks like one. Rather the revelation of her chestnut-ness occurs simultaneously with the revelation of her beauty. Garrard identifies various attitudes towards the natural world in his book, and this co-extensiveness – and the sensuousness that often accompanies it in Groff’s novel – reminds us of Garrard’s discussion of the Heideggerian phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which “highlight[s] the sensuous pleasure of encounters with the ‘flesh of the world’, as distinct from the Puritan self-denial often wrongly associated with environmentalism” (36). Such sensuousness allows for a far deeper engagement with nature on Bit’s part, an engagement so deep in fact that it becomes difficult to talk of separations between Bit, the world, and nature. Because nature is not simply a reference

point, a stock of metaphors that Bit can use to make comparative links between people, animals and plants (although he does a fair amount of this), it might be better to talk of nature in the novel as being in some way inseparable from Bit's world, even of it actually *being* his world. In some practical aspects this is very much the case: Bit is a child not only born into the commune, but one identified as the first such child, the story of his birth having developed into "[t]he legend of Bit Stone, the first Arcadian ever" (14), told and retold again and again. The novel communicates this closeness between Bit and nature in particular ways like those noted above and in a more general adoption of a pastoral mode in which nature, rather than human history, sets the terms of Bit's existence:

For a few breaths he forgets himself in the swim of nature around him. Its rhythm is so different from Bit's human own, both more nervous and more patient. He sees a bug that is smaller than a period on a page. He sees the sky, bigger than all that's in his head. An overwhelm from two directions, vast and tiny, together (57)

If the phrase "Bit's human own" seems to run counter to the fluidity discussed above, it is overshadowed by the way that human distinctiveness is placed into a larger scheme that presses in from "two directions." He, the human, is encompassed in a conception of the world in which phenomena – living organisms, time – are considered not in terms of size or quality but in terms of their *relation* to other things. (It is here that *Arcadia* most recalls James Lovelock's gaia theory, and ecological thinking more broadly). This is an enclosed totality which is elaborated on later in the novel in terms of the cyclical nature of time:

Time comes to him one morning, stealing in. One moment he is looking at the lion puppet on his hand ... and the next he understands something he never knew to question. He sees it clearly, now, how time is flexible, a rubber band. It can stretch long and be clumped tight, can be knotted and folded over itself, and all the while it is endless, a loop. There will be night and then morning, and then night again. The year will end, another one will begin, will end. An old man dies, a baby is born (71)

Not only does time steal in of its own volition, something outside human control or measurement and therefore not a human construction, but it is self-contained, a complete unit, a "loop." When Groff notes that "[t]ime is slippery in Arcadia; the gong rules the days, the seasons rule the rest" (125), she is talking about the inadequacies of the human conception of time (bound up with attempts to measure it) in the face of a deeper

temporality – what Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* has called “evolutionary rather than biographical time” (11) – of which humans are merely a part.⁴⁴

If these various conceptions of nature – as a criterion of beauty, as possessing its own particular temporal rhythms different to those of humans – are staples of the pastoral (what William Turner, writing in *Harper's* in 1985, described as “our myth [of nature:] eternal, unchanging, pure, gentle, wise, innocent, balanced, harmonious, and good” [48]), the final section of Groff's novel seems more in keeping with specifically contemporary concerns. In the past decade or so, an increasing number of novels and short stories have variously combined examinations of the threat of global climate change with futurism and/or depictions of apocalyptic end times. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) has received a lot of attention in this regard, as has Margaret Atwood's science fiction, including *The Year of the Flood* (2009). Other novels we might mention in this company are Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012) and various works by T.C. Boyle: *A Friend of the Earth* (2000), the title story in the collection *After the Plague* (2001) and *When the Killing's Done* (2012).⁴⁵ To a certain extent, the final part of *Arcadia* fits into this sub-genre. Set in 2018, a bird-flu-like pandemic is moving ever closer to Arcadia, which creates a sense of encroachment which dominates the tone of this final section. The radio is constantly on, informing us of the disease's movements. Climate change has hastened, much more quickly than it is currently, to the extent that:

The ice caps have melted, the glaciers are nearly gone; the interiors of the continents becoming unlivable, the coasts so storm-battered people are fleeing by the millions. New Orleans and the Florida Keys are being abandoned. The hot land-bound places are being given up for lost; Phoenix and Denver becoming ghost towns. (223)

Farming and food production have been affected, resulting in the effective extinction of particular foods like lettuce (228) and oranges (240). All the warnings of the sixties and

⁴⁴ Bennett uses this perspective on time to explore how “5000 million years ago ... some of the conglomerations of fleshy matter-energy that made up life underwent a sudden *mineralization*, and a new material for constructing living creatures emerged: bone” (11, Bennett's emphasis). This process, says Bennett, viewed in the context of “the long and slow time of evolution,” makes it seem as if “mineral material [is] the active power, and human beings, with their much-lauded capacity for self-directed action, appear as *its* product” (11).

⁴⁵ For a brief discussion of this trend, see the section on post-apocalyptic fiction in Caren Irr's *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (169-173).

seventies environmental movements seem to have been well-founded, and Groff suggests that (some) of the Arcadians expected this outcome and prepared for it. Bit's father Abe, between the early 1970s and this near-future, becomes "obsessed with what would happen in the end of the era of oil and went offgrid, solar everything, backup windmill; rainwater catchment system, backup well; ambient solar heating, backup woodstove" (180). Yet if the Arcadians' fears were in part the impetus for the creation of their commune and their establishment of a more environmentally-friendly existence, in the shadow of an encroaching end time Groff introduces a further reappraisal – of the Arcadians' assumptions about the relationship between humans and nature. So if the world's problems seem to bear out Abe's worries, by this point for Bit Arcadia has revealed its own misconceptions and misunderstandings of human life, readings which themselves need to be reassessed. Having been forced to leave as a teenager in the 1980s when the commune fell apart, Bit returns to Arcadia in 2018 to care for his dying mother Hannah, a geographical return that spurs in him a similar revisiting of the hopes and dreams of the commune (echoing the temporal loop he pondered as a child).

This is the point in the novel where a number of differing temporalities come together, and while they don't necessarily compete, they do not entirely coalesce either. Firstly, then, if the global pandemic, the extinction of plants humans need for nourishment, and the abandonment of major cities constitute a major threat to the continued existence of the human race in general, this apocalyptic atmosphere extends both to the commune of Arcadia and to one of its inhabitants in particular, Hannah. As Astrid, Hannah's friend who comes to care for her puts it, "I am trying to discover what we are, Arcadians. Going extinct" (241). This final section layers multiple extinctions: plants that grow on earth, humans (in general) that live on it, the cities they've built, the alternatives to those cities which they've also built, individual inhabitants of those settlements. Yet counterpoised against these endings, Groff sets a number of returns and successions that seem to suggest all will not be lost. Placed together, all of this may, to a greater or lesser extent, be considered in terms of the loops and cycles mentioned briefly above. Just as there are a number of extinctions, so there are a number of returns: Hannah, who prior to her illness and death had been living apart from Abe in the desert of Arizona returns to both Abe and to Arcadia; as they age, and the wheelchair-bound Abe finds it harder to care for the increasingly immobile Hannah, they decide on a suicide pact, but only Abe succeeds, and Hannah, to her great anger, returns from the dead – "the Universe called you back" says Astrid (237); Bit, who has lived his adult life as a photographer and university teacher in

New York City, returns to Arcadia, as does Astrid, and all the former inhabitants of the commune when they come to visit Hannah. If one person who has disappeared conspicuously does not return – Astrid’s daughter and Bit’s wife Helle – Bit at least finds comfort in “the good feeling that he is sitting in a fold of time” (237) created by the repetition of characteristics from generation to generation, with Helle’s – as well as Hannah’s and Astrid’s – traits reappearing in Bit’s daughter Grete. Nature returns, too, not only in Groff’s taking up again of the kinds of descriptions we saw in the first section, but more obviously in the form of the plants that reclaim Arcadia from the corporate film headquarters one of Handy’s sons turned it into after the commune dissolved: “Ivy is choking the windows on the west side. There are saplings in the gutters. Pigeons sit heaped on the roofline” (232).

Crucially, though, these are not uncritical returns. Rather, these various reassessments allow for the possibility of the renewal of the aims of the commune with added wisdom and experience. If Groff offers a multiplicity of temporalities in this final section, the resulting lesson of the retrospection undertaken in it is very clear. What Bit misses most about Arcadia is not his relationship with the natural world – alienated from and starved of it as he nevertheless was in the city – but its sense of community. The lesson is this: “Bit sees what Arcadia had been, populous and full of song. Now it feels empty. Without people, land is only land” (259); “Unpeopled, this place would be nothing” (284). He expands on this in a rant to his parents at the kitchen table in New York:

it wasn’t the country that was so beautiful about the whole Arcadian experiment, don’t you see? It was the people, the interconnection, everyone relying on everyone else, the closeness. The villages are all dying now, small-town America is dying, and the only place where the same feeling exists now is here, in the city, millions of people all breathing the same air. This, here, now, is more utopia than utopia, more than your pretty little house out in the middle of the forest with only woodchucks for neighbors. Can’t you see? All of we kids are here, almost all of the kids from Arcadia, are here in the city. We’ve gone urban because we’re all looking for what we lost. This is the only place that approximates it. (208)

What Bit comes to understand is that Arcadia – utopia – is less a physical place than a result of relationships and interconnections between individuals. A commune is not defined by the establishment of geographical borders but by an agreement on a common purpose.

Arcadia's physical location is rejected in the final pages (Bit and Grete go back to New York City after Hannah dies) because by that point it is "only land" after the death or desertion of those that gave it life: his parents, their friends, and the "children of Arcadia" who ended up rejecting its ideals: "Dylan went neocon, Cole became punk, Jincy searched for suburbia, Leif turned antiseptic and inward" (275). We will return to the questions raised by these extinctions, renewals, and possibilities, but for now it is to the role stories play in that establishment of community that we turn.

2. Reagan's Helicopters: Self-Sustaining Stories

The always capitalized "Outside" (86) begins to seep into the book from the beginning of the second section, when Bit is fourteen. It begins with the strafing attacks by government helicopters involved in Reagan's escalated war on drugs, and goes on to dramatize Arcadia's expansion as more and more hippies, strays, hangers-on and runaways arrive, the difficulties the commune faces in sustaining itself, and its gradual collapse and disbandment after a summer feast day and celebration known as Cockaigne Day ends with a dead man being found in the vegetable patch and the commune raided by police (148).⁴⁶ After this discovery, the inhabitants of what is at that point a 900-strong commune begin to leave, including the original Arcadians, and eventually Bit and his family, who move to New York. The world beyond Arcadia enters the novel initially in the form of dull, prison-like apartments, the frustrating administrative job Hannah is forced to take, and the terrifying world of school. In the third section, when Bit is an adult, the world persists in the form of bills, babysitters and as the swallower of Helle, who disappears into it, never to return. With this increased interaction between Arcadia and its inhabitants and the world beyond its boundaries comes more interaction between the commune's creation myths and self-sustaining stories and the accounts of public history, signalled at first by the literal invasion of the world – the US government in the form of Reagan's helicopters – into Arcadia. As such, the novel incorporates a confrontation between a pastoralizing intent and a threatening history that Anthony Hutchison, in *Writing the Republic: Liberalism and Morality in American Political Fiction*, has described when speaking about Phillip Roth's *American Pastoral*. If both Roth and Groff "deploy... the pastoral in order to evoke a *secular* vision of Eden" (however different those Edens are), these deployments also evoke

⁴⁶ That the commune's dissolution is sealed on Cockaigne Day is a rather literal illustration of the failure of utopia. In medieval times, Cockaigne was imagined as a utopian land of plenty in which the hardships of peasant life were no longer present. It is found in the Kildare Poems of the mid-fourteenth century and is the subject of a 1566 painting called *The Land of Cockaigne* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

“a fall from innocence that must be attributed to the intrusion of History” (123, Hutchison’s emphasis).

Quite how the “Outside” world was conceived prior to its sudden presence in Bit’s life is open to debate. Not only does Bit never set foot outside of Arcadia until he leaves with his family, but prior to that “[h]e cannot imagine himself in the Outside. Because ... he cannot imagine the greater world at all” (161). Other members of the commune move in it – Handy goes on music tours, others go to work as midwives, farm labourers or mechanics – and come back with tales of it:

Beyond Arcadia hulk the things he has dreamed of: museums, steel towers, pools, zoos, theaters, oceans full of strange creatures. He knows that his understanding of the Outside is imprecise, both gleaned and muted. It is whatever makes its way to his ears, the stories people bring with them, what he has read. (96-7)

In other words, the world for Bit is effectively a fairytale, something fictional heard about in stories, set against the intense materiality of the world of Arcadia with its animals and plants. As we saw earlier, Bit’s sense of time is both very personal, composed of his one-on-one interaction with the natural world, and very large, even “too much” for him, made from a “universe [which] pulses outward at impossible speeds” (96). If here we can detect elements of the phenomenologists’ emphasis on internal time consciousness and the ecologists’ deep time – those temporalities that between them form what we saw earlier described as “[a]n overwhelm from two directions, vast and tiny, together” – what is missing is a temporality that might bridge them, one which might be characterized as social or collective, the temporality and history created by human societies, local, national and international. Arcadia shuts itself off from versions of these that already exist, preferring instead to create its own stories which are so powerful for Bit that those of the Outside pale in significance. Indeed, such is the strength of these stories that we might even suggest that those built up by Arcadia constitute the commune as much as any geographical location or political aim. Reagan’s helicopters, then, bring evidence of other stories, and are signs that the commune is threatened not just by drug enforcement agencies but by the weakening of its sustaining stories. As they are threatened, however, the question of just what Arcadia’s myths about itself are, and how they work, becomes prominent.

One of the first things we learn about them is that not only do they pre-date Bit's birth, but that they are so important to Arcadia, so frequently told and re-told, that some of them constitute his "first memory, although he hadn't been born when [the event, in this case a group of women in the river singing] happened" (1). Indeed Bit's own birth is one such story, "told by Arcadia until it became communal, told again and again until the story grew inside him to become Bit's own" (2). In Arcadia, then, stories are first asked to fulfil a collective role and only after that has been established do they become individualized. In this sense, stories, even those of such an intensely individual nature like one's own birth, resemble the personal possessions – from trust-fund money to sentimental keepsakes – taken into public ownership when individuals enter the commune (30).

Part of the reason for this is that these stories are required as glue to bind Arcadia together as a community. When the influx of new arrivals begins to threaten the commune, it is because the process of inducting newcomers into these collective stories breaks down: "In the past, of course, there was no flood of strangers to trample Arcadia's etiquette; there were stories that kept them in line" (138). Similarly, when Bit leaves Arcadia, it is not the shocking organization of the outside world itself that scares him, but the absence of the patchwork of stories that constituted his history and environment: "He had barely survived his transition from Arcadia to the gritty Outside when he was fourteen ... The warp of stories that had always blanketed him, his personal mythology, was invisible, so nobody knew him" (186). Indeed, when he re-encounters Helle as an adult for the first time, after years apart, it is their shared childhood stories of Arcadia that allow them to have a relationship that results in their daughter Grete: "There in the chic gloss of the gallery, the years peeled off of him and all the old stories hummed, taut, between them, electric lines" (191). Yet for all their power, these stories do not emerge organically; rather the Arcadians are aware of their power and use, and their self-conscious construction of them accompanies their renovation of Arcadia House while Handy is away on tour. Groff makes this link explicit when the young Bit mishears the word "renovation" for "renovelation," to which Hannah remarks: "I think your word is apt. Re-novelization. Reimagining our story" (18). Building the house in which the commune will live is intertwined with the building of a story about the commune.

Quite which kinds – genres – of stories Arcadia makes about itself is hinted at in this section of the novel, as Groff interweaves her depiction of the Arcadians' renovation of the house with the history of the commune's founding. One, unsurprisingly, is the pastoral.

The commune was not named accidentally, but on the founders' discovery of the house and its lintel engraving: "*In Arcadia Ego*, someone said. They looked to the lintel, where the words were hastily chiseled. Astrid said: Arcadia. It means, *Even in Arcadia am I*. Poussin made a painting. Quote comes from Virgil" (29). If the phrase has often been understood to refer to the presence of death even in a utopia, then Astrid, alone in understanding the significance of the quotation ("[n]obody heard her" [29]), has conferred upon her by her knowledge an element of prescience. More generally, marking the phrase's provenance in this way suggests, a little contradictorily, that Arcadia's collapse is both of its own making (by constructing an Arcadia, they are accepting – consciously or otherwise – the existence of death) and that it is inevitable. This latter anticipates perhaps the apocalyptic tenor of the final section of the novel but it also conceives of time as a threat and points to the ahistoricism of pastoralized conceptions of time, which in their cyclical emphases leave little room for the irruptive event. Here, though, seems an omen: if Arcadia represents an eternal loop, death is the event. If death is certain, so is the event.

If mention of Virgil's quotation brings to mind endings in the form of death, another kind of story the Arcadians tell about themselves privileges foundations, beginnings, and births. Much of the first section of the novel borrows, a little self-consciously, what Robert Alter calls the "homespun simplicity" (148) of the paratactic language⁴⁷ and cadence of the Bible to describe the establishment of the commune, aligning God's construction of the world with the Arcadians' building of their own:

Three years passed full of hard work, some failed crops, some good. They borrowed oxen from the Amish neighbours to plow the fields. Later, the silent, hardworking Amish men came – a surprise – to help reap the sorghum, barley, soy. There was enough only to eat and none to sell. (31)⁴⁸

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the importance of parataxis in biblical and American literary language, see Alter's fifth chapter, "The World through Parataxis" (146-183).

⁴⁸ Alter calls this self-consciousness "biblicizing" (14), and the use of such language in *Arcadia* might be read as an instance of the narrative voice taking on linguistic traits of the characters it is depicting, who are very much concerned with the import of their own actions. In reaching for "the sternly grand language" (Alter, 15) of the King James Version, Groff's Arcadians partake of another American, specifically literary, tradition. As Alter notes: "By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, much of [the King James Version's] language was surely felt to be archaic ... and yet the text was, paradoxically, part of everyday life, a familiar fixture of hearth and home. In this way, the sheer dissemination of the King James Version created a stylistic precedent for the American ear in which a language that was elaborately old-fashioned, that stood at a distance from contemporary usage, was assumed to be the vehicle for expressing matters of high import and grand spiritual scope" (13-4). Here the description of the Arcadians' efforts to be self-sustaining are given a "breadth and moral gravity" (14) through the adoption of language that is, as Alter puts it, "plain and dignified, resonant in its very ordinariness" (13). The Amish presence aids the

Continues on following page.

Although this alignment is not strictly adhered to, Groff makes enough of it to plant in the reader's mind the suggestion that the history of Arcadia is in some way a smaller version of the history of mankind as a whole, particularly in the passages describing the child Bit exploring the half-completed house, where his movement from darkness to light echoes the beginning of Genesis: "The men haven't touched these rooms yet: they are moldy and dark. He pushes at a latch, and a door swings open with a foul exhalation. Between the darkness of the hall he is in and the light above the stairwell, he takes the light and goes up" (32). That Groff only hints at this connection between biblical creation stories and that of Arcadia makes more sense toward the end of the first section, when she clarifies their relation less in terms of the repetition found in similarity but more in the continuance found in inheritance. On Handy's return from the tour, with the completed Arcadia House awaiting him, the local puppetry troupe put on a show: "They take out their now-dirtied Adam and Eve puppets, and then two new puppets they've made, an ancient man with muttonchops and a gaunt woman with a psychedelic dress" (74). If the Adam and Eve puppets' dirtiness suggests age, the two new puppets, representations of the Arcadian type, have an assertive role: Adam and Eve were the first dwellers in Eden, and their rightful inheritors are the hippies that live in Arcadia. The construction of the commune is not a mirroring of the biblical creation, then, but a new version of it.

In his exploration of the half-completed Arcadia house, Bit experiences another example of the interrelation of commune and stories. Rising into the light, he finds a book of Grimm's fairytales, a rather literal rendering of the point that the house gives birth to, creates, stories. While the biblically-tinged creation myths sustain the adults' work ethic and commitment, the fairytales offer Bit a form in which his worries about Hannah's depression – and that depression itself – can be assuaged, even healed, through his undertaking of a "Quest" (66). Sneaking into the woods alone, he is confronted by "the witch, the one he has dreamed of" (67). Yet while Groff allows the adults their consoling stories, and suggests that Arcadia would not continue without them, Bit only experiences the disabusing of his fantasies: the witch is "not ugly: her hair is a soft white with a black streak, and she has roses in her cheeks" (67), and while he feels "[t]his is it, the nut of the Quest, what he was meant to find, the moment where everything will turn," nothing happens, "the woman only steps backwards and becomes the woods again" (68).

What, then, do these stories say about Arcadia? Or, more pertinently, what do the Arcadians use their stories to say about themselves? Rather a lot, and on a number of levels. Firstly, they are in the process of building a utopia, setting themselves apart from contemporary American society. They are also inserting themselves into an established tradition of American utopianism that stems from what William Turner describes as a particularly American sense of freedom: “[f]or Americans, true freedom is not the choice at the ballot box but the opportunity to create a new world out of nothing” (50). If America itself has been understood in various ways as a utopia,⁴⁹ then Arcadians identify a – perhaps by now familiar – American lineage that includes the Amish (“The Oldest Utopianists ... for generations, they’ve lived the most perfect lives they can believe in” [160]) and Thoreau’s *Walden*: “Bit thinks of another man at another pond, long ago; the way Thoreau saw the moon looming over flesh-plowed fields and knew the earth was worthy to inhabit” (243).⁵⁰ With this genealogy though, the Arcadians fail to make the distinction Turner does between individualism and collectivity. The Arcadians, for all their collectivity, see themselves in an individualist tradition. While one may be tempted to suggest that their project tries to include a re-envisioning of this tradition in more collective terms, it is not something dwelt on – at least in these explicit terms – in the novel. Rather the communal life is part of their radical gesture, consistent with the aims of social ecology, as laid out by Murray Bookchin, who in his founding essay “What Is Social Ecology?” wrote:

A fundamental unit will be the *commune*, a closely knit, small community based on love, friendship, shared values, and commitment to a common life ... cooperative institutions in all areas of social life will be formed: mutualistic associations for child care and education, for production and distribution, for cultural creation, for play and enjoyment, for reflection and spiritual renewal. Organization will be based not on the demands of *power*, but rather on the *self-realization of persons* as free social beings” (Bookchin’s emphasis, quoted by Garrard, 33)

⁴⁹ I undertake a more sustained discussion of this idea in the following chapter on David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*.

⁵⁰ Thoreau was big in the sixties. In *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Lawrence Buell finds these varied uses of his work: “During one ten-year span from the mid-sixties through the mid-seventies ... Thoreau was acclaimed as the first hippie by a nudist magazine, recommended as a model for disturbed teenagers, cited by the Viet Cong in broadcasts urging American GI’s to desert, celebrated by environmental activists as ‘one of our first preservationists,’ and embraced by a contributor to the John Birch Society magazine as ‘our greatest reactionary’” (313-4).

Such self-realization can be seen to inform the Arcadians' attitude toward religion, of which they are suspicious – particularly its organized variety – even allowing for their incorporation of the Amish into their utopian tradition and their claims as the true custodians of the Adam and Eve story. In fact, while such claims appear to leave the biblical version relatively untouched, they undertake as much a reclamation of the Adam and Eve story for secular purposes (as Hutchison said of Roth) as they remain faithful to it. If the biblical story thrust the first man and woman into a world created by another, the Arcadians assume the roles of both humans and God, building the world anew themselves, wresting power from God in order to both become God-like themselves and to imbue their efforts with the sanctity and power of religious tradition. Bit's father Abe teaches a "History of Revolutions Tutorial" (120) in which one of the assigned texts is Milton's *Paradise Lost*. What the Arcadians find useful in it, however, is not the religious structure but Milton's anti-establishmentarianism, which they transform into a proto-counterculture manifesto:

We make our own heavens and hells. He's saying that things look bad but we can transform what they are by applying thought to our situations. When we are in hell, it's our own fault. It seems like a kind of radical idea for the time Milton was writing because instead of putting faith in a God who predetermines everything, Satan is implying that we can be our own gods in a way. It's privileging self-creation over being fated creatures who have no say in our destinies (121)

If this last sentiment darkly recalls the origins of the Arcadian phrase Astrid observes on the door lintel, the inhabitants of the commune nonetheless find a kindred spirit in what they perceive to be *Paradise Lost*'s religious self-actualization. While they reject the authority of God, mainstream religion's conception of the power and strength of belief – directed towards one's own potential – is required for their utopian project to succeed. This is "the whole idea of Arcadia. That civilization can be better if we just believe" (121); it is an "idea of struggle, the attempt to *act* in order to make your heaven come to fruition" (122).

The role of these stories, then, in their assertion of utopian realities, in their praise of nature and the commune, in their faith in self-realization, is to create and reinforce a continuing and sustaining foundational myth of Arcadia-as-utopia, specifically because its sense of

community extends beyond the human. When the commune begins to collapse, all of this, entangled as it is, collapses together: the commune expands too quickly and to too big a size, not only for the physical infrastructure to cope but also for the stories to continue to work as an adhesive gluing together the human builders and operators of that infrastructure, and as those collective stories – which themselves narrate a utopian collectivity that extends beyond the human to animal and plant life – lose their purchase, so too does the sense of community that stops people stealing food, keeps people committed to their role in the Sanitation Unit, and prevents them from committing rape and murder.⁵¹ As Bit realizes, “[i]t isn’t important if the story was ever true ... he knows stories don’t need to be factual to be vital. He understands ... that when we lose the stories we have believed about ourselves, we are losing more than stories, we are losing ourselves” (208). Belief, that precious thing cribbed from religion, is present here, too, in the maintenance of stories; believing in the community’s stories is for Bit a utopian act.

3. Endings, Returns, The Moment

If we’ve seen at points in this thesis attempts to outline a third way between uncritical championing of the New Left and countercultural project and its reactionary dismissal, *Arcadia* introduces this debate through its incorporation of a number of different temporalities which begin to hint at the novel’s attitude toward the counterculture. These multiple temporalities are present, as we have seen, throughout the book, but become most pronounced in the final section, named after Hieronymous Bosch’s triptych the “Garden of Earthly Delights.” If we have already mentioned the two most prominent temporal experiences – the encroachment of death, the possibility of return and succession – here in the final section of the novel they are met by a third (on which the novel ends), namely the sense of living in and for the moment at hand. How these three relate will be the focus of the rest of this chapter. If the headings of endings, returns, and living in the moment broadly name the dominant emphasis of each temporality, they are by no means uniform within themselves.

3a. Endings

The section begins on a note of finality, “[a]t the end of a sunset party” at which the music

⁵¹ The final image of the Cockaigne Day celebration is Bit’s observation of Helle’s rape by two men (144-5) and the next morning they find a body in the vegetable patch (147).

played is the nostalgic “rock of their late youth” and a woman whose “face [is] gleaming with the beauty she must have had in her twenties” laments a lover she met in Venice, a city now “half-drowned” due to global warming (221). The chapter begins on a note of finality more wrenching than nostalgia, too: the death of Abe by suicide. It is a death undramatized in the novel, a death to which neither the reader nor Bit is party. The chapter thus begins under the shadow of a death which has already happened in the space between the third and fourth sections and at which we arrive only belatedly, in the aftermath. Though now in the future (the section is set in 2018), the reader arrives in it belatedly as well; if the heating planet is accumulating “lost Atlantises” (221), they have already vanished prior to our knowledge of it, and we can only mourn them: “Poor Micronesia, poor Tuvalu” (221). That Groff refrains from depicting either Abe’s death or the death of these countries and cities only enhances the reader’s experience of their disappearance; in this world one *begins* with death and constructs life (or at least attempts to) in a “disintegrating world” (222). What Groff does allow us is a witness to these disappearances in the form of Hannah, who had attempted to end her life as part of a pact with Abe, only to be “called ... back” by the “Universe.”⁵² Yet if Hannah is a witness to the gap in the novel in which Abe dies – and, presumably, in which the planet as a whole comes to be threatened (the novel’s previous section, set in 2008, looks much like our 2008) – she not only withholds that information but suggests, through her anger at her death now being out of her control, that her survival was a mistake: “Quick and painless, how I wanted to go” (237). If Hannah’s intended message (she claims she is back from the near-dead [251]) is that she was not supposed to have been able to bear that message, that she should have died, for its part the novel seems instead to see the deferral of her death as evidence of the *increased* presence of death. This is not a contradiction. Rather such increased presence – be it specifically in the form of Bit’s parents or on a global scale in the loss of cities to global warming or swathes of the world’s population to the flu pandemic – seems to make identifying the precise moment of Hannah’s death more difficult than one would assume. If she died once – if she “came back” (251) as she puts it – only to return, and her illness means that it is reasonably certain that she will die soon, the moment at which she will die not only remains unidentifiable but the simultaneous desire to die by her own hand and the fact of encroaching death at the hands of her illness

⁵² Here we might find a slight echo of Jennifer Egan’s *The Invisible Circus*, in which Phoebe attempts to fill in – or at least account for – a similar void at the centre of her life and at the centre of her understanding of a particular event (in this case her sense of “the sixties”). Egan offers us no recourse to a witness – the prime candidate in this case being Phoebe’s dead sister Faith – while also tempting us to consider Wolf as just that, although as we saw in chapter 1 his status as witness is severely compromised by his own involvement in that to which he acts as witness.

suggests that Hannah may in fact experience *two* deaths. Even three, if one considers her actual death – effectively euthanasia on the collaborative part of Astrid, Bit and Hannah’s nurse Luisa (282) – to be qualitatively different to those others: by her own hand, by her illness, by the hands of others.

Death is present in life not just as an abstract certainty, or as Martin Heidegger’s temporal defining point, but as a living category made material by particular signs on Hannah’s body: Bit “tries not to see what he has already seen, that her right leg and arm have atrophied and twisted. The left arm is going that way, also” (249). This has its own complicated temporality. If Bit “tries not to see” now, in the present, what he has “already,” in the past, seen – if he effectively tries to un-see his mother’s decay by turning the clock back – that decay is itself not something that occurs suddenly but gradually, over time. If Hannah’s limbs “have” atrophied, suggesting that it is possible to stop time enough to ascribe a specific state of Hannah’s health at particular times (once they were not atrophied, but now they are), the fact that the process is incomplete, that other parts of her body are “going that way, also,” suggests a less definitive transition. Time attacks Bit from both sides: if he saw his mother’s decay in the past and aims to turn the clock back to an earlier point in that past in order to wipe the memory from his mind, the projected continuation of the process (“going that way”) means that he is trying to escape the presence of the future – death – in the present, too. The futility of this is implicit in the assessment of the doctor (and Bit’s lover) who cares for Hannah: “Your mother’s not yet made of stone. Not yet” (255). While the repetition of “not yet” can be read optimistically as a bulwark against time, it can only be so if one accepts the certainty that the time will arrive where the question can be answered with absolute certainty.

There is greater uncertainty in the movement of the “SARS-like, avian flu-like” (230) disease that is at “epidemic” (223) levels at the beginning of the section and swiftly becomes a pandemic. If this is death beginning the section in another way, the temporality of it also contrasts quite abruptly with that of the early parts of the novel. The rolling news bulletins that chart the spread of the disease, updates from which come through on Grete’s e-reader and on the radio, not only combine to create a sense that the disease is getting nearer and nearer Arcadia, but also instantiate a sort of urgently relentless topicality utterly at odds with the slowness of deep, ecological time: “there is a *viral epidemic in Indonesia*” (223, Groff’s emphasis); “a thousand dead in Java, sudden sickness, quarantine” (230); “[o]ver seven thousand people are dead; the disease has spread to Hong Kong, Singapore,

mainland China, San Francisco, Adelaide” (247); “[i]n Mexico City, the morgues are full” (271); “five hundred thousand dead” (273). If here, like previously, the relationship between temporality and death is one of continuance – people have already died, are continuing to and more will do so in the future – these deaths are not of the same order. Each new death increases the total, further dooms those still un-affected. But this seemingly unstoppable march – a thousand to five hundred thousand in a few months – is accompanied by an uncertainty reflected in the abstraction of these news reports: no-one knows who will catch it next, or where, and the sheer numbers of sufferers threatens to dematerialize the reality of the disease. The closest *Arcadia* comes to particularizing these abstract deaths is in its report of the death of a former Arcadian’s granddaughter in Seattle (269); beyond that, we never experience the material reality of the disease in the way we do Hannah’s, partly because Bit turns the radio or television “off before the personal stories begin [because h]e can only bear tragedy if it’s abstract” (273), but also because the novel’s interest here is in the eschatological as much as in the familial. The numbers are important because we are being asked to consider the end of humanity, but if such destruction is newly conceivable – newly imminent, too – thanks to the spread of the disease, its threat is limited to the human inhabitants of the planet. The effects of global warming, however, pre-dating and probably outlasting the flu-like disease, threaten not just human life but plant and animal too, as well as the basic atmospheric conditions of the planet as a whole. While some might find something of an overdose of apocalypticism in these scenarios, their simultaneity is significant because they represent stages in a movement from particular to abstract versions of death: from the immediacy of Hannah’s, to the potential immediacy of the community’s from the epidemic (“the mail carriers wear gloves and masks, and in all the stores, there are great tippy sacks of wind-up radios and soup and bottled water” [265]), to the largely abstract – at least for Bit and his immediate family, less so for those Venetians, Micronesians and Tuvaluans now dead or displaced. Groff thus creates what seems like an entirely apocalyptic world across the three kinds of time we talked about in previous sections: the phenomenological or individual, the social or historical, and the ecological.

3b. Returns

Against this total eschatology, Groff counterpoises a series of returns: in the third section, Hannah returns to Arcadia and to Abe; then, in the final section, Hannah returns from the (near-)dead while Bit, Astrid and other Arcadians return to Arcadia; Helle’s characteristics

re-appear in Grete, as do her grandmothers Astrid's and Hannah's; nature returns to Arcadia; while Glory, one of the Amish neighbours, is revealed to have spent five years away from her people, working in IT, only to return to the safety of her community (268). If these are propped against the inevitability of death, such returns acknowledge the word's double meaning, its double temporality, both returning *to* the past and the return *of* the past in the present. Redemption and forgiveness are two concepts invoked in this final section which put this double sense of return into play. They are also occasions for critiques of the countercultural project.

On Hannah's return from the hospital after her suicide attempt, she is met by Glory, one of the Amish inhabitants of the area near Arcadia who watched the establishment and dissolution of the commune and sometimes offered help:

Glory, Hannah calls out, and at first, Bit thinks it's an expostulation, but the woman gives a wave. She comes up the porch steps, a pie wrapped in a dishtowel still steaming in her hands. She places the pie gently on Hannah's lap. Her eyes are sad, though, and skitter off Hannah's face.

Hannah reaches with her good hand and grasps the woman's wrist. She says, gazing up at her Amish friend, You young people, take a walk up to Arcadia house until lunch. It seems I need to do a little work at redemption here.

Indeed, the little Amish woman says in a low and guttural voice. You do. (257)

As a working definition, we might suggest that redemption involves the equalization of bad acts in the past with good acts in the present, and indeed the OED's definition of it as "[t]he activity of making the best use *of* time" ("Redemption") seems to have this in mind. The dictionary seems also to confirm Hannah's sense that in order to be redeemed, she will need to engage in "a little work" (it is not something someone else can easily confer) when it talks of "atonement," "compensation," and the "action ... of discharging or paying off a debt, obligation, or charge." Glory, for her part, might connect her role in this action with the dictionary's description of redemption as "[t]he action of saving, delivering, or restoring a person," yet we should note that the majority of its definitions speak of actions undertaken by those who desire redemption rather than those in a position to grant it. Redemption, then, seems to be the result of work carried out by an individual who desires to be redeemed (an offender), work which is recognized by the person to whom that individual acted badly (a sufferer) or by someone invested with the authority to grant that

redemption. In our case, Glory, who does hold a natural authority and who also feels Hannah's offences personally, seems to fall part of the way between these two.

Quite what work Hannah understands herself as needing to undertake is not immediately clear. If the Arcadians and the Amish always had an uneasy relationship with one another – as Glory remarks, “when your people were here, it was the big debate among my family. What to do? We watched with horror! Naked people, drugs, loud music!” (268) – the latter nonetheless came to the commune's aid and often helped them farm and harvest. Yet their belief in God separated them; as Bit puts it, the Amish “are too close to a kind of God he has never been able to believe in, a flesh-eating, stern-browed, whipping-post kind” (234). Hannah's edging nearer to death could, then, be occasion for her to move nearer to God too. Yet I don't think this is the cause of her need for redemption, at least not quite, because Glory was the one who found Abe's dead body and Hannah's unconscious one after their suicide attempt (234), and although the Amish appear at Abe's funeral, they keep their distance. It is only when Hannah comes back to Arcadia that Glory re-appears. The need for redemption, then, seems to be associated with death; Hannah needs to be redeemed for seeking out and inviting death – even trying to control it – in a very Arcadian usurping of God's powers. (Remember the History of Revolutions Tutorial – perhaps it is not a coincidence that the leader of the class, Abe, is the one who betters God and succeeds in killing himself). Indeed, the terms of Hannah's need for redemption revisit the themes of that Tutorial more broadly. If Glory counsels an acceptance of death as part of life – she is dismissive of the pandemic, saying “There are always diseases ... We have survived other things” (269) – such acceptance is not altogether dissimilar from the oneness with the Universe advanced by the Arcadians, who believe in natural births and resist modern medicine as much as possible (256). What is different, we remember from the Tutorial, is the conception of an entity in whose name this oneness is pursued: for Glory, it is an authority called God, for the Arcadians a comrade they call nature. The difference resides not in their differing conceptions of oneness per se, but in the hierarchical relationship between the entities – human and God, human and nature – joining together. As Glory puts it:

It seems a give-and-take, you know? Freedom or community, community or freedom. One must decide the way one wants to live. I chose community.

Why can't you have both? says Grete, frowning. I think you could have both.

You want both, Glory says, you are destined to fail ... Too much freedom, it rots

things in communities, quick. That was the problem with your Arcadia. (268)

Glory privileges (her idea of) community over freedom because the version of the latter offered by twenty-first-century America is ultimately “lonely”; in the wider world, she “realized that I was not happy, and would do anything to be taken in and loved” (268) by a group of people that would offer that love, even if the price of that love is independence. Glory’s understanding of the wider world’s conception of freedom is that more akin to the “freedom-from” David Foster Wallace discusses in *Infinite Jest*, a negative freedom conceived of as “freedom from constraint and forced duress” associated with authority, obligation, and the imposition of particular cultural, religious, and political values, and distinct from a “freedom-to” believe in a cause and to give oneself to that cause (1997a, 320). For Glory, this negative freedom asks too high a price, one that Wallace describes in *The Pale King* (2011) as lonely because if “money and capitalism [are] equal to freedom ... buying or selling something doesn’t obligate you to anything except what’s written in the contract” (192-3). In *The Pale King*, Wallace says that “freedom of this kind is also very close, on the psychological continuum, to loneliness” (192). Against this lonely freedom Glory privileges a communal subordination, though she is not quite right to think of the Arcadians as exclusively interested in freedom; they also counselled divesting oneself of individualist longings and submitting themselves to the rules of the commune:

All things would be held in common, all possessions – bank accounts, trust funds – would go into the pot, everyone who joins must give everything they have ... All people would be welcome to join, as long as they promised to work ... all must subject themselves to Creative Critiques when they erred or didn’t pull their weight, where they had to undergo the community telling them off, a ritual cleansing. (30)

She is entirely right, however, when she suggests that they failed to balance their desire for freedom with their obligations to the community; the real target of Glory’s critique is Grete’s confidence in having both, and it is this confidence – or perhaps we should say hubris – that Hannah needs to be redeemed for. In recognizing such need, Hannah is already on the way to receiving it; humility, as Reinhold Niebuhr suggested, is the antidote to hubris, which was, as Wolf in *The Invisible Circus* claimed, the downfall of the countercultural project. For Glory, the Arcadians’ greatest mistake was over-confidence in their ability to create a utopia in which freedom and community were balanced and harmonious. The ultimate sign of such hubris, for her, is the attempt to pre-empt one’s

given moment of death; that Hannah failed to wrestle control over hers from God is a kind of punishment.

In addition to working at redemption with Glory, Hannah asks forgiveness of Bit:

My little Bit. Will you forgive me?

Bit's silence, born of surprise, stretches. Forgive what, exactly?

... He stares at the claw of her hand until he somehow knows she means Arcadia, their common wound, how she had pushed toward perfection but, tiring, turned away.

It is true that most of the children of Arcadia rebelled. (275)

Forgiveness, like redemption, involves an equalization of the past and the present, but whereas the latter requires more of the individual seeking it, forgiveness places a greater emphasis on he or she that might confer it on another, as we see here; similarly the OED stresses the giving up of resentment, the granting of a pardon ("Forgiveness"). There is a slight difference in the temporalities involved, too. If redemption seeks redress in the form of an act in the present which is equal (by being diametrically opposed ethically) to one in the past, forgiveness suggests more of a continuation between the past and the present, with the act of forgiving itself the end of a temporal process which has ran from the moment in the past in which an action gave rise to the need for forgiveness until the present moment in which that need is simultaneously conferred and given up. If forgiveness is something offered by a harmed party, it is done so by the paradoxical erasure of the need for forgiveness. That is what happens here. If Bit does in fact blame Hannah for not being strong enough to make Arcadia work – the verdict that she tired and turned away is his – his act of forgiveness consists in dismissing the need for it. That the children rebelled in explicitly political ways, seeking conservative lifestyles (suburbia), adopting actual (neo-)conservative politics or embracing the nihilism of punk, is for Bit part of "the ancient story" of generational strife (276). The definite article is important; this is not only an old story, but a universal one accorded biblical language: "the deliberate rejection of what gave birth to the youth and created the man" (276). Encoded in this, and in Bit's remark that "There is nothing to forgive" (276), is his own critique of the Arcadian project. First and foremost, the commune's dissipation is the result of a localized and isolated example of a universal family story. It is what happens in families everywhere throughout time and not the result of specific choices or beliefs held by the counterculture or Arcadia itself. Notably absent here, even allowing for Bit's ascribing of problems to generational factors, is any specific reference to either the 'generation gap' between the

counterculture and their parents or the aging counterculture and their children, born between the 1960s and 1980s. For Bit, the significance of understanding events in terms of generations is found in a universal conception of the parent-child relationship rather than in any particular generation of parents and children.

If Bit excuses Arcadia responsibility for its own failings, he continues to credit it with its own successes. In fact, love, its greatest success, is what he credits with stopping him from finding the need to forgive Hannah for the “many failures” (275) he admits she made. Yet this isn’t just the love of a son for his mother but rather love enlisted as both a political value to be championed and one which once committed to becomes hard to escape from: “The love, which he had turned from, breathes, blinks, swallows. A creature, stirred back to life. He *can’t* be separate. It is impossible. He is part of the whole” (276). This kind of love behaves in a similar way to the stories Arcadia told about itself did, as a societal glue preventing him from distancing himself from the commune’s ideals. As Bit sees it, then, the need to forgive Hannah for her part in the failures of Arcadia is eradicated by the strongest of the values Arcadia itself instilled in him. This comes at a price though, which we might characterize either as a self-delusion or a refusal to adopt the position of the critic. At this point in the novel where Bit comes closest to criticizing Arcadia (he is otherwise a relentless cheerleader for it), he turns away from placing its project in a historical context and looks instead to spatial, not temporal, metaphors to describe it. If Hannah’s request for forgiveness prompts him to consider Arcadia in temporal terms, reflecting on past actions and behaviours, going over the narratives of his friends’ lives as they unfolded in time, he pulls up short before the next step – putting Arcadia itself into a historical narrative – and both turns the historical situatedness of the commune into an archetype of the parent-child relationship and understands the betrothal of its one value not in terms of generational inheritance but in the spatial language of inclusion, exclusion, home, and belonging: “He *can’t* be separate. It is impossible. He is part of the whole.” If critical distance is required to assess the failures – of Arcadia as a whole, of Hannah individually – Bit rejects it, which is understandable even as it prevents him from improving or continuing Arcadia’s promise.

That this should foreground a dilemma between uncritically reaffirming Arcadia’s values and the more distanced examination of its successes and failures is understandable given another version of the return this final section of *Arcadia* incorporates. Here, returns are made to places, ideas, and people but they are either slightly changed by that return or something from the past appears in the present, only slightly altered. Thus at Abe’s funeral,

“[t]hey come to him [Bit], the people he loved when he was a child. But they have gone grotesque” (233). Or in nursing Hannah “[h]e remembers the births he assisted when he was young, brushing the sweaty hair from the women’s foreheads and rubbing their swollen flesh. Here, he would be a midwife to his mother’s decay” (236). Perhaps the clearest example of this, though, is in the way the novel suggests that the relationships between generations are more complicated than the handing down of characteristics from one to another. Here is a typical example:

Astrid had had her bad teeth pulled in her fifties, and the dentures finish her face the way woodwork finishes a room. She wears long, loose clothes in earth tones that she manages to make elegant. Helle would have been like her mother, if his wife had chosen to share her old age with Bit. But when Grete sits beside her mormor ... he sees how his daughter is a second Astrid, leavened with Hannah’s honey. It brushes him, the good feeling that he is sitting in a fold of time. (236-7)

The typical linear sequence of grandmother (Astrid) to daughter (Helle) to granddaughter (Grete) has been disrupted here by Helle’s disappearance. Because Bit doesn’t know which characteristics of her mother Helle took into older age, he creates a complicated alternative reality in which she *would have by now* taken on certain characteristics of her mother who has them *now*, had Helle not *then* chosen not to spend her *future* (our present) with Bit. In place of the disappeared Helle, Grete becomes not just a “second Astrid” but also an implied second Helle, taking on the characteristics of Astrid – albeit with elements of Hannah Helle would not have exhibited because she wasn’t a blood-relation of Hannah like Grete is – that Helle “would have.” In addition to the ‘return-but different’ of her grandmothers’ characteristics in her, then, Grete is also the ‘return-but different’ of the disappeared Helle. Although this isn’t the traditional model of generational inheritance, it exists because that model doesn’t, and the “good feeling” it gives Bit is good because of the threat that the linear succession would be broken by Helle’s disappearance. The succour provided by the traditional model is felt by Hannah too, whom it “comforts ... to handle things her own mother and grandmother touched” (275). That such a threat of disruption exists is an acknowledgement that there is a very real possibility of apocalypse, either through the disease or through global warming, and the comfort thinking of generational inheritance gives both Bit and Hannah obscures slightly the very serious job it is being asked to do of providing an alternative conception of time. In a world threatened with death in so obvious a way, the need to believe that “[e]very limit ... is a beginning as well as an ending” (284) becomes more important, as it holds within it a hope that beyond

the apocalypse is a post-apocalypse not of the fallen world of popular imagination but built on a foundation of continuity with the old world. When faced with a new world that is not utopian but dystopian, it seems even utopians dream of tradition and succession.

Nature occupies an intriguing place here, and its relationship to temporality is revisited in interesting ways. If nature has elsewhere in the novel been given its own temporality, manifested in the cycles of the seasons and suchlike, and this idea shares with the traditional sense of generational succession the crucial element of continuation, then in this final section it also has the power to provide glimpses of a dystopian scenario to come. At times this happens in the same sentences:

He looks up the hill to Arcadia House. Erewhon Illuminations abandoned it after Leif disappeared, and Astrid has left it vacant for two years. Ivy is choking the windows on the west side. There are saplings in the gutters. Pigeons sit heaped on the roofline, buttoning house to sky. (232)⁵³

If the regrowth of vegetation and the return of animals to Arcadia House is to be welcomed after the human imperialism of (Astrid's son) Leif's corporate film headquarters, a change originally protested by a number of Arcadians (245) and the reason Abe came back to Arcadia after their years in the city (Hannah refused, and went to live in Arizona), this is not a picture of human, plant, and animal harmony. The ivy chokes the windows and the new trees obstruct the traces of human inhabitation on the roof, an echo of the moment Abe became paralysed at the end of the first section of the novel, "fix[ing] the place on the roof where the oak branch fell" (80). If nature is reclaiming the house and the land from corporate tending, the oak tree itself remains "enclosed entirely in glass" in the "courtyard [which] is a strange place now, the air heavy and damp" (234). When Bit comes face to face with "a raccoon in Leif's vast bathtub" (264) on the upper floors, the animal's usurpation of corporate luxury reminds us that this house "where, once upon a time, over two hundred had slept" now sleeps not even "one man" in "his own private quarters" (170). If nature is reclaiming its position, it does so without the harmonious relationship with

⁵³ Groff's allusion to Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) opens up a field of further references to utopian fiction, particularly William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890) which, like *Arcadia*, incorporates considerations of socialist politics and elements of science-fiction. The ivy choking the windows in this image recalls the final painting of American artist Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* series (1833-6). If the second painting is titled "The Arcadian or Pastoral State" (1834) and shows an idealized, perfect landscape, the final one, titled simply *Desolation* depicts the fallen remains of a city being slowly covered in ivy. Cole is associated with the Hudson River School of painters who took as their subject the path of the river through upstate New York. Groff's *Arcadia* is also situated on "six hundred acres in upstate New York" (28).

humans that the commune was founded on. The “good sediment of time” (261) reminds us that the house of corporate opulence was also the house of communal utopianism, and both now are gone, appearing by degrees nearer to each other than to the ivy, the oak or the raccoon. Perhaps as a mitigating hope in the face of potential extinction, the disappearance of human life, at least on the individual level of Hannah’s illness, is, if not welcomed as such, at least romanticized into a narrative that makes death less terrifying and less final: “She doesn’t wake. Her body is clenching back to its original form. She is a wisp, she would be gone in a slight wind” (281).

3c. The Moment

Occasionally the two categories – endings and returns – confront each other directly, as in this passage:

If he listens closely, over the wind against the screens and a distant plane above, he can almost hear the Arcadia he knew, the strum of Handy’s guitar somewhere in the thickness of the house, the women in the Eatery kitchen, laughing as they cook. His own young voice, urgent and high. Although he almost hurts his ears, straining, he can’t understand what the once-upon-a-time Bit is saying to the current version of himself or to the one who will stand here in the future, a man changed as the house is changed, worn a little more by time and loss, gradually dragged down by gravity. If he is so lucky. If they are all so lucky. The schools on the West Coast have been closed; the airports are bare. Dogs trot down the middle of L.A.’s freeways. In Summerton, the mail carriers wear gloves and masks, and in all the stores, there are great tippy stacks of wind-up radios and soup and bottled water. But in Arcadia, with their well and garden and basement full of food, they are an island. They could wait as the disease washed again and again over the world and emerge when it was safe again. What relief there would be in starting anew; what hope there would be in doing better. The old story, Noah’s, the first step into the world scrubbed clean. (264-5)

A number of the variations on the two categories we’ve been examining are present here, too. If we see the return of Arcadia to Bit rather than the other way round, as the physical place is different when he returns to it this version held in his memory is different too, registered in the word “almost”: a gap between what he hears and what he knows (or feels)

Arcadia to have been. If only part of the commune as it was returns to him, he remembers enough of it to know that something is missing; he experiences this gap. Yet if the lesson of the commune remains out of reach, he doesn't doubt that a lesson exists. It is not that he is not sure whether the older version of himself, dwelling in the commune, is saying anything to his present self, but rather that "he can't understand" what this self definitely is saying. Whatever it is, the message appears to be constant: it is saying it to him in the present, and will say it to the version of himself "who will stand here in the future." Furthermore, he will continue too, ready to receive the message. If the first half of this extract ends with the evocation of the slow, gradual movement of time ("worn a little more by time and loss, gradually dragged down"), juxtaposed against this, and putting the continuation into such doubt that it appears more a hope than a certainty, is the possibility of an immediate and total end. Yet juxtaposed in turn against *this* is an echo of the exemption from history Arcadia is granted in Bit's critique mentioned above and in its own stories and pastoralism; Arcadia, "with [its] well and garden and basement full of food ... [is] an island," unaffected by the catastrophes of world history, biding its time until "it [is] safe again." If the hope of starting anew bespeaks the hope of a post-apocalypse, one in which the 'return-but different' itself returns in the hope of "doing better," the "relief" of starting out in "a world scrubbed clean" has a rather terrifying, or, as Irr has it, a "full-blown prophetic" tone to it – the way the world will be "scrubbed clean" in this scenario is through illness, and what it will be clean of will be people.⁵⁴

If this passage stretches the language of returns and endings to extremity – from the never-changing message spoken by the younger Bit to a world emptied of its billions of human inhabitants – it tries to find some mediating relation between the two in the form of the phenomenological experience of the moment. This is the temporality that ends the novel: "In this moment that blooms and fades as it passes, he is enough, and all is well in the world" (289). It should be clear that this is a compromise ("enough"), and Groff herself acknowledged this in an interview with Samuel Hankin on WCHE radio's *The Avid Reader*: "everything is destined for ending, and as soon as you accept that what options do we have ... you live in the moment and that's not an answer for any of our problems but it is a way of coping" (WCHE). Bit copes by adopting an art form devoted to the capture of moments – photography – because in it he finds the possibility of transcendence:

⁵⁴ This is the extreme face of the "neo-Malthusianism" Greg Garrard observes in the apocalypticism of some environmentalists like the Earth First! movement, who "combined revolutionary inhumanism [and] apocalyptic beliefs" (112). It also echoes the desire of uber-capitalist Josh, in *Eat the Document*, who dreamed of a clean world emptied of literal and metaphorical garbage.

a dizzying upsweep of possibility; the rolls could be thirty years old and useless, true, but the distortion of age could make for the unexpected, the sublime: the emulsion cracked or melted, the plastic fragile and easily rent, the effects unreplicable. In his mind, the images unfold atop one another like layers of translucent tissue ... How perverse, the possibility of beauty, unearthed when he least expected it. That there could be such surprises left in the world (242)

While Bit is unwilling or unable to give Arcadia historicity, the commune's utopian faith in the politically new is present here only in aesthetic form, in the suddenly immediate anticipation of beauty. In the final section of *Arcadia*, this new becomes synonymous with the momentary therapy of art: "The sun and wind pour into the sheets on the line. There are bodies in the billowing, forms created and lost in a breath. He takes photo after photo with his ruined film, to hold them there. This is what, long ago, made him fall in love with photography: the paying of attention, the capturing of time" (274). On a conscious level, Bit employs photography as a way of solidifying himself against the passing of time and the encroachment of death, but there is a tension between such passing – the space that allows for phrases like "this is what, long ago, made him fall in love with photography" – and the act itself, which denies that extension. In basing his existence on the moment, Bit adheres to the "Aristotelian concept of the 'instant'," which, as Peter Osborne explains in *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, "generates a time-scale of serial succession out of the differentiation of two point-like instants, in relation to which it becomes possible ... to speak of a 'before' and an 'after' (*but not a 'past' or a 'future'*)" (48, my emphasis). If this is in part Bit's reaction to his mother's slow death and occurs as the pandemic peaks and diminishes, it might also be seen in the light of the kind of "emergency thinking" (19) discussed by Elaine Scarry in her book *Thinking in an Emergency*. Such thinking, she explains, occurs in urgent situations because "[t]he implicit claim of emergency" – be that a war or the outbreak of a disease – "is that all procedures and all thinking must cease because the emergency requires that 1) an action must be taken, and 2) the action must be taken relatively quickly" (7). Scarry is considering these matters in light of the second Iraq War and the "War on Terror," and it is implicit in her book that the "seduction against thinking in an emergency," which "comes ... from a false opposition between thinking and acting [and] from a plausible (but in the end, false) opposition between thinking and *rapid* action" (14), leads to a kind of countdown urgency and a sort of crisis ethics which involves an evacuation of contemplation and ethical

concerns.⁵⁵ If, then, Groff raises the question of temporal experience (and conceptions of it) in the context of an emergency and in that of Bit's inability (or refusal) to historicize Arcadia, we cannot fail to read his acceptance of living in the moment in these ethical terms. This is not to say that the novel indicts Bit, and we as readers should be clear that there are significant differences of both degree and kind between the sorts of ethical abdication Scarry is concerned with and that seen in *Arcadia*, but what is useful about Scarry's writing is that it helps us identify more clearly the implications of Bit's temporality. Living in the moment, in other words, manifests the same curtailed, isolated temporality that emergency thinking does; both, to greater or lesser extents, are enemies of the kind of extension found in – required by – historicization. While Bit's desire to sure up the fragments of his mother's life against her body's decay makes sense as a personal and emotional response, its expansion into a broader temporal experience is, as Groff admitted in her interview with Hankin, *historically* insufficient.

4. Stories: Consolations?

The intertwining of Bit's rediscovery of photography and his adoption of the value of the momentary ensures that the book ends by explicitly linking (the role of) art and time. Yet if Groff's acknowledgement that living in the moment is not a political solution but a personal one, and if Bit finds emotional solace in photography but fails to come to any conclusions about Arcadia, what can we make of *Arcadia*'s own form, which relies on the same momentary clarity of an image that photography does as it proceeds through a series of vignettes? The book is founded on the same kind of vivid, captured image that Bit so delights in, short moments sliced out of the tapestry of hours and days. If we have noted how the returns and endings are present at various levels of the novel, this momentary logic is present as much on a large scale as it is on a small one: the four sections of the book, much longer than chapters but made up of isolated vignettes which accrue into a narrative, are themselves set in isolated periods with large gaps in-between: section one is set in 1973, two in 1982, three in 2008, four in 2018. One might be tempted, then, to read *Arcadia*'s own assessment of the role of art as echoing Bit's; art provides a therapeutic comfort in its capturing of moments and is less a method of knowing and appraising the past. Nevertheless, this latter is what seems to be (at least partly) the aim in the first section of the novel. We would also be wise to remember Groff's point in the Hankin interview: a

⁵⁵ It is the sort of environment that says there is 'no time for morals' and allows a kind of 'torture ethics' in which what was previously prohibited – both lawfully and ethically – becomes admissible.

compromise is reached but its very nature means it is “not an answer for any of our problems.” More than anything, the novel seems ambivalent about the role of art in relation to time. If it acknowledges the role narrative plays in linking together isolated temporal experiences into a sense of continuousness and personal and public history – Bit, at one point, tries to “tell ... stories about his day, to pull the shapeless mass of his time into some saving form” (274) – it nevertheless asserts that while this form is to a certain extent arbitrary (remember Bit’s understanding that stories don’t need to be ‘true’ to be operative), constructing it is an active process. As Astrid snaps to Hannah, when the latter is lamenting that she was brought back from the dead “[f]or no reason”: “You find the reason” (237). If Astrid’s short-tempered remark is another echo of the Arcadians’ faith in self-realization, it can also be read as a rebuke to Bit’s refusal to historicize. Coming in the final section of the book, it is a challenge: for the “many failures” of Arcadia, and of the countercultural project more broadly, one must “find a reason.” If Bit responds to his immediate surroundings by finding the reason for Hannah’s return from the dead – and her subsequent suffering – in providing a reassuring scene “not for [him but] for Grete” (251) he is unable to find one for that larger question. Narrative is offered up, as it were, in Astrid’s remark, as a possibility for making sense of temporal experience, but Bit doesn’t accept it. What has broken down at the end of the novel, or what no longer exist, are adequate narrative forms that have changed in the same way that the world – and particularly the sense of time it leads individuals to have – has. Bit’s embrace of living in the moment, then, really is a compromise, because if it is living – in the form of “the hushed spaces in life ... his images on the wall broken beyond beauty into blisters and fragments,” “[p]ay[ing] attention ... [n]ot to the grand gesture, but to the passing breath” (289) – it is life without a story to link these moments together. Living in the moment is the only possible outcome of not having these stories – it doesn’t require the knitting together process of narrative because it is not continuous but fragmented and individual. The ending of the novel, then, gives real resonance to a phrase that appears mid-way through it, as the commune slowly collapses: “Arcadia feels like a book with the pages torn out” (155). This, however, leaves some troubling questions for *Arcadia*. If we are aligning Bit’s compromised position at the end of the book with his inability to acquire or create suitable narratives to link together the moments he dwells in, then the novel’s own formal organization seems to invite comparisons between Bit’s predicament and the novel’s temporal-political implications. Of course there *is* narrative in *Arcadia* – we’ve just finished reading it – but the more pertinent questions should focus on whether the novel itself enacts a method of historicization that Bit is unable to.

We noted earlier that *Arcadia*'s conception of time allowed for temporalities of the very small and very large. If it initially missed a temporality that would link those to social and historical experience, it claimed to have found that in the myths it built up around its linkage of those grand and minute temporalities. Its myths, then, were self-reflexive in the sense that they were stories whose content involved the linking of disparate temporalities and whose form was designed to undertake that linking. At the end of the novel, Bit appears isolated and cast off not just from the experience of large and small temporalities that characterized his childhood but also from an affirming set of narratives that would place him in a particular social, historical and temporal context, something emphasized by Groff setting the final section of the novel in the future. If *Arcadia* is not, in Irr's words, "entirely" a post-apocalyptic novel – the disease rolls back; the pandemic is curbed – it does end in a post-utopian world that bears at least one similarity, in Bit's late reflections on *Arcadia*, with what Irr describes as a characteristic of recent apocalyptic narratives: it incorporates "visions of social revolution stripped of the public and political forum and all the attendant issues of the large group" (172). Similarly, Groff's future resembles that of other novels, in which, as Irr describes them, "a self-consciously restricted social sphere ... is detached from the traces of political action, yet still contain[s] within itself important symbols of continuity with dissenting and literate traditions" (172). Irr sees these characteristics as evidence of the current limited ability of fiction writers to create "sustained visions of social renewal" (172), and that

while political revolution is as still possible to imagine in historical fiction, the social rebuilding associated with successful egalitarian alternatives to neoliberalism remains, for the foreseeable future, a speculative endeavour in U.S. fiction. Urgent as the social revolution appears to many authors, its depiction requires taking a step out of the framework of the nation as we know it and into worlds elsewhere – or, if I may put it this way, elsewhere. To envision the social revolution in twenty-first-century U.S. fiction requires a move past the end of the history into another time frame altogether (172-3)

With this in mind, *Arcadia* might look like both a piece of historical fiction – imagining the social revolution of the sixties and seventies – and a piece of speculative writing set in an "elsewhen." If in taking on such a large task, necessity demands the fragmented imagistic evocation of times and places through the use of vignettes – because they take up

less space – Groff’s future however is not a space that allows her, as Irr suggests is the case for other writers, to “envision the [renewal of] social revolution,” however limited. In fact, one might say that there is little reason to situate the final section of the novel in the future at all; global warming has increased, but not (yet) obliterated all life, neither has the pandemic (versions of which happen regularly, throughout history – setting the final section in 2018 recalls the flu pandemic of 1918), and Bit’s relation to the counterculture – admitting failures, but bemoaning its disappearance nonetheless – is, as we have seen in this thesis, common to novels of the early twenty-first century. Furthermore, Groff’s future is only six years after the publication of her novel. What this rather insubstantial future *does* do, though, is create precisely that – insubstantiality; or, phenomenological experience untethered from history. In other words, its form manifests its content; Bit and the novel, at the end, both lack historicity. It is the ‘shape’ of the – or perhaps we should say ‘a’ – future without any materiality.

Called To Account:**Conversion, Time and Reconciliation in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King***

“It may be that this kind of work changes you. Even just rote exams. It might actually change your brain. For the most part, it’s now almost as if I’m trapped in the present” (154). Narrated by Chris Fogle, these lines appear near the beginning of §22 of David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King* and identify the section – one of the most polished and complete in the unfinished posthumous novel – as a narrative of both psychological change and temporal experience. The next paragraph includes this remark: “From what I understand, I’m supposed to explain how I arrived at this career. Where I came from” (154). This focus on an internal, psychological “change” in Fogle as a result of a particular line of work, combined with his acknowledgement of the need to chart that change over time, mark out the forthcoming narrative’s form as a tale of conversion. His “from what I understand” indicates that he is aware of this narrative character, and introduces a self-reflexivity that extends to narrative form: his is a specific kind of story with particular requirements at the levels of both structure and content.

That Fogle can identify the change seems to indicate that the story will be told from a temporal vantage point that allows him to draw a line between his past and his present, while his references to both internal psychology (“change your brain”) and external context (“Where I came from”) combine to suggest that his narrative will thread together a sense of objective, calendar time with Fogle’s own personal experiences in it. In other words, it will be a narrative of transformation in which temporality both affords the space in which change can happen and marks that change: ‘before I was this; after I was this.’ It is a narrative in which Fogle, as Jean-François Lyotard writes of Augustine’s confessions, is “the work of time: he is waiting for himself to arrive ... he is catching himself up” (2011, 36). The Fogle now narrating will tell a story of his past that will help us come to a better understanding of who he is in the present; he will give himself a context and a history.

It is important that Fogle explicitly frames his narrative as one of change because it alerts us to a series of questions about literature and time. If all narratives can be said to be in some way narratives of change, by making particular note of it Fogle is drawing attention to the conceptions of time required to narrate change. In other words, this won’t just be a narrative of change, it will also be an enquiry into the possibility of narrating change.

Furthermore, if change can be characterized as a moment in which something – in this case a person – alters, then identifying, examining, and narrating that specific moment will be important. Yet while Fogle seems very much aware of his narratorial position, he is also uncertain about his ability to fully fulfil its requirements; this doubt about his capacity to narrate the change in himself will play a significant role in the form and content of his narrative and will also be a major focus of this chapter. In fact, I want to suggest that Fogle's narrative is chiefly characterized by a tension between his profound belief that he has changed and an equally strong doubt about his ability to communicate how that change occurred. Because this tension is placed in a conversion narrative which pays particular attention to the order(ing) of the events in it, I have found it useful to structure this chapter in the same way Fogle does his story: we will follow step by step as he tells of his conversion.

1. The Conversion Narrative

While the opening of the section suggests that the narrative will focus on Fogle's personal and individual change, Wallace is quick to introduce a broader context for his conversion. This is first established in Fogle's mentions of his parents' views of his wasteful pre-conversion lifestyle, and then confirmed in a quick succession of contextualizing references which situate his story in a particular time and place. So his remarks that his parents' divorce is "typical of that era" and his adolescent rebellion was "probably being played out in homes all over America" provide broad establishing co-ordinates (and also prefigure his narrative's concerns with temporal periods and national culture and politics) before he specifically situates his story "in the Chicagoland area in the 1970s" (156). The narrative of change, then, takes place in an identifiable historical and geographical context, one which we infer from his use of the word "typical" and the widespread nature of his adolescent rebellion he views as being capable of conferring some sort of explanation on his story. This context also seems to be one with which Fogle has a reciprocal relationship: it is able to influence his actions and he understands himself in relation to it.

If Fogle remarks on the difficulties of narrating his story in addition to actually undertaking that narration, a similar dynamic is at work in the relaying of such historical context. Fogle doesn't offer it merely as the colour of local references and invocation of "this period's hair[styles]" and "bell-bottom cords ... acetate and nylon, flared collars ... metal peace-sign[s] ... [and] commercial psychedelia" (157), but rather uses it to consolidate the

impression of generational significance the reader infers from Fogle's mention of family dynamics and the particular but also quite general setting. If this implies a certain intertwining of personal and private history, of individual and group, Fogle directly establishes this in his description of the 1970s as a period which "now seems as abstract and unfocused as I was myself" (157). It invites the reader to understand Fogle's story as both a narrative of individual change and one which will have significance beyond Fogle himself and say something about the America of that time. If Fogle describes his story as one in which he rejects a "nihilistically wastoid and hip" (163) lifestyle in favour of committed, civic-minded IRS service, then we can read this arc as having resonances beyond Fogle in the country at large. The intertwining of pop-cultural references such as "Carnation Instant Breakfast, John Travolta, disco fever, and children's tee shirts with the 'Fonz' on them" (158) and references to Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, feminism, 1970s economics and the bicentennial celebrations of 1976 (158-164) further serves to place Fogle's individual story in a wider narrative of American history. In so doing, Wallace signals the concerns of this section: can Fogle be understood as emblematic of his generation? What is the relationship of Fogle's singular experience to this larger generational and national narrative? How does the temporality of Fogle's personal story of change relate to national narratives of historical change?

What makes Fogle's narrative a narrative is in part its temporal extension, its commitment to explaining 'where he came from.' Only by extending it can the moment of conversion, the moment of change, make any sense. Fogle identifies three potential reasons for his conversion, only the last of which actually occurs at the moment of conversion itself: his father's freak death in full view of Fogle (which although he describes as "not directly connected to my choice of the IRS as a career" [172] can be viewed as contributory, especially when considering the generational aspects of the story, which we will come to later), his experiences of hyper-awareness while taking a drug called Obetrol, and his experience in a university classroom Fogle accidentally walks into where he hears a substitute teacher giving an end-of-term speech exhorting the students to choose what the teacher views as a heroic profession: accountancy. In addition, there are moments or mini-epiphanies that lead up to the final one during the substitute teacher's address, namely the moment of realizing greater world- and self-awareness while on Obetrol, an evangelical Christian girl's own tale of conversion, and the Obetrol-like experience of registering the "terrifying pun" of a TV announcer intoning "*You're watching As The World Turns*" (222) as Fogle sits on his sofa, watching a TV programme called *As The World Turns* as the

world continues on without him. It is hard to assess the extent to which the reasons and the epiphanies are conceived of by Fogle as separate categories, partly because some appear to overlap, such as his experiences with Obetrol. While he describes his father's death as "a sudden, horrible, and life-changing kind of event" (172), his narration of it focuses more on his relationship with his father, with temporal concerns channelled into the broader historical and social contexts surrounding it. By contrast, the Christian girl's story is focused not only on the epiphanic moment but includes an analysis by Fogle of her narration of that moment. Despite Fogle's tendency toward digression, which has earned him the nickname "'Irrelevant'" (271), he charts a relatively clear progression toward his conversion. He begins by describing his hip lifestyle, then narrates his experiences on Obetrol, followed by his father's death and the Christian girl's story. At this point he begins narrating the climactic scene of the substitute teacher's exhortation but interrupts it to explain the experience a few days earlier with *As The World Turns* before returning to the substitute teacher. The chapter finishes with a comparatively short passage in which Fogle describes the immediate results of his conversion.

1a. Obetrol/ling

For Fogle, taking Obetrol involves "waking up to how unaware [he] normally" (186) is of his physical and mental state at any given moment. It gives him an intensity of awareness which he experiences as a self-reflexive "*I am in this room right now*" (182, Wallace's emphasis). Unlike other types of awareness, this feels "true and important" (185) because "[s]ome of the stuff it brought into awareness wasn't pleasant, it was just reality" (184); it demands a kind of self-knowledge Fogle has not yet experienced. His description of "Obetrolling" as a form of "'doubling'" (180) echoes the relationship between Fogle and historical context we described above: the awareness the drug brings into being involves not just introspection but a simultaneous awareness of his place in a wider environment and allows him, albeit momentarily, to reconcile his inner and outer worlds. "What [feels] like ... a sort of emergence, however briefly, from the fuzziness and drift of my life" (182) involves him "noticing the changes [in the world] and being affected by them, and by the fact that I knew I was noticing them" (183). These brief moments are a prefiguration of the more prolonged calls to action that find their climax in the accountancy classroom and are particularly distinct from the highly individual experience of other drugs, like the euphoria of cocaine, which he mentions (177). Not only is Obetrol the only drug that gives him a heightened sense of both his own self and of that self's direct historical, cultural and social

context, the field of action which places various limits and possibilities on that self, but Fogle enjoys taking it specifically because of this effect. Although at this point he hasn't formulated it in such clear terms, we might suggest that Obetrolling provides a model of integration of inner and outer worlds that leads one to commit to a cause. Whatever the limits of his appreciation of Obetrol's effects though, Fogle is clear that "[t]he point wasn't just to zone out on pretty music" (184) but to experience the sense that the world is addressing itself uniquely to him and enlisting him in its activity: "What became more intense was my awareness of my own part in it" (182).

As part of his constant reflection on his narrative process, Fogle assesses the role Obetrol played in his conversion on a number of occasions. This is the first:

I like now to think of the Obetrol and other subtypes of speed as more of a kind of signpost or directional sign, pointing to what might be possible if I could become more aware and alive in daily life. In this sense, I think that abusing these drugs was a valuable experience for me, as I was basically so feckless and unfocused during this period that I needed a very clear, blunt type of hint that there was much more to being an alive, responsible, autonomous adult than I had any idea of at the time (186)

This description of Obetrolling as a "directional sign" is important. If it echoes Don Gately's experience of the twelve-step process in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, where the narcotic addict wants his sponsors to "grab him by the lapels and just tell him what AA God to have an understanding of, and give him totally blunt and dogmatic orders about how to turn over his Diseased will to whatever this Higher Power is" (1997a, 443), it is because both novels echo linguistically the religious underpinnings of conversion. In *The Pale King*, this "directional sign" is swiftly followed on the next page by "flickers of deeper awareness" which convince Fogle that there are depths to him "that blazed in an almost sacred way" (187). The phrase "directional sign" also bespeaks a particular understanding of narrative as a path leading to a destination. In this case, the sign points him to both the final destination ("what might be possible") and the next stage of the journey ("if I could become more aware and alive in daily life").⁵⁶

⁵⁶ We might too identify here a formal manifestation of the larger issue we mentioned above, namely the relationship between Fogle's individual story and the more populous domain of history. Although he is narrating his own personal story, Fogle is aware he is working within a larger narrative convention to which his story is but one addition. The degree to which Fogle is faithful to his own story should be considered in light of his decision to use this convention, a decision that suggests both a certain literary

There is a temporal dimension to this. Fogle's ability to identify the heightened awareness of Obetrol as a directional sign reminds us that this story is told after the fact and that, as Lyotard wrote, Fogle is telling the story and waiting for his old self to catch up with his new self. By definition, then, this assessment of Obetrolling's importance is only possible from this position of hindsight, and it follows that the significance of Obetrolling can only be properly assessed when it is placed in a larger temporal and narrative context in which its consequences can be more accurately identified. This is an early instance of the complications that arise from his inability to isolate a clear before and after to his conversion, insofar as it questions the temporal distance between them: if it is true that 'before' Fogle was nihilistically hip and wastoid and 'after' he is a committed tax examiner, and if one can only assess the importance of particular events in retrospect with the benefit of additional contextual information, how can one isolate a before and an after?

Furthermore, if conversion marks an absolute point of change – involving a recalibration of time around it in which life starts anew post-conversion, with everything now related back to that foundational moment – how can Fogle integrate this kind of temporality with the gradual, collective contextuality implied by “directional signs” and “flickers”? At some point in the past, Fogle was a wastoid; most of that life occurred before the starting point of the story he is now telling, although his narrative starts with a broad and general description of his life in a non-specific 'then' which includes his late teens and early twenties (because the hip, nihilist, wastoid lifestyle he lived is one all his peers did too, it is hard to ascribe a single starting point to his own. Indeed it is the fact that his peers led similar lives that suggests that such a lifestyle finds its origins in cultural and social factors beyond immediate family groups). At some point, also in the past, he experienced his conversion and change in lifestyle. Now, in what appears to be the narrative present, Fogle narrates those events, moving from the more temporally indistinct hip lifestyle through increasingly more specific temporal events to his conversion and to the immediate results of that conversion, namely his purchase of a suitable accountancy wardrobe over the Christmas 1978 vacation, during which he researches options for switching to an accountancy major, and his attendance at an IRS recruitment office in “early January 1979” (236) which ends the section.

discernment and an awareness that conventions require adherence. In turn, it invests the choice of such a narrative genre with rhetorical, ethical, and even in this particular context political impetus: beyond the attempt to explain how he arrived at this career, Fogle also aims to persuade others of its value.

Earlier in the novel, a figure describing himself as the “real” (66) David Foster Wallace appears, claiming to be “addressing you from my Form 8829-deductible home office at 725 Indian Hill Blvd., Claremont 91711 CA, on this fifth day of spring, 2005” (66-7) with the intention of convincing the reader that “[a]ll of this is true. This book is really true” (67). *The Pale King*, ‘Wallace’ informs us, is “in point of fact, more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story” (67). In presenting the novel in this way, ‘Wallace’ introduces himself as a possible mediating presence between Fogle and the reader, and in so doing raises the question of the temporal distance between Fogle’s narrated experience (clearly and repeatedly established to have taken place in the 1970s) and his narration of that experience, which conceivably could have taken place at any point between then and this newly-introduced narratorial present of the “fifth day of spring, 2005.”

This question can be partly answered through recourse to other sections of the novel. §14 features a series of IRS examiners giving talking-heads-style testimonies about life in the Service for a film whose “putative working title is *Your IRS Today*” and which is “[p]ossibly for public TV” or to be shown in “schools, civics classes” (100). Its aim is to “humanize, demystify the Service, help citizens understand how hard and important their job is [and] [t]hat [IRS workers are] not hostile or machines” (100). (It is towards this brief that Fogle directs his “[f]rom what I understand, I’m supposed to explain how I arrived at this career” at the beginning of his narrative. A few pages on, as he is describing the pop-cultural ephemera of the 1970s, he stops to anxiously ask “I don’t know if this is enough. I don’t know what anybody else has told you” [162]). Each speaker in §14 is identified by their Social Security number and their testimonies are depicted as reported speech. If we follow the memoir conceit, the opening pages of the section which establish the scene are narrated by ‘Wallace’ and the testimonies of IRS workers are transcriptions from “Videotape File 047804(r)” which is “© 1984, Internal Revenue Service” and “Used by Permission” (103), and presumably free of editorial interference. If, then, Fogle’s story is a video testimony, then the time of his narration is 1984, twenty-one years before it is placed in *The Pale King* by ‘David Wallace’ and at least five years after most of the events it recounts. This is corroborated by Fogle’s remark that “I’ve been here five years” (165), because we know due to his scrupulous referrals to the calendar that he joined the Service in 1979. Returning with this knowledge to the question of before and after, Fogle’s narration is now revealed to be itself a historical artefact. His story is a self-contained unit, not in fact a narrative in which his old self will catch up with his new self but a narration that isolates through a temporal distance of twenty-one years the processing of the causes

and effects of conversion from the apparent present of the novel (“the fifth day of spring, 2005”). It turns not only the conversion itself but Fogle’s narration of the conversion into a historical event. This will become important later on when we consider the ending of Fogle’s narration.

Fogle describes Obetrolling as a signpost along a continuing path, an event important enough to be mentioned in the first place but not one isolated and elevated above others. Fogle’s rather ambivalent later remarks about the importance of Obetrolling repeat this uncertainty about the relation between important events. At first, he notes that “[t]he truth is that I think the Obetrol and doubling was my first glimmer of the sort of impetus that I believe helped lead me into the Service” (187), indicating that he sees the drug’s importance as the first stepping stone towards his final conversion. Later, though, he remarks that

these flickers of deeper awareness, whether drug-induced or not – for it is arguable how much that ultimately matters – probably had more of a direct effect on my life and direction’s change and my entering the Service in 1979 than did my father’s accident, or possibly even more than the dramatic experience I underwent in the Advanced Tax review class that I had sat in on by mistake (189)

The question is one of emphasis: do we place it on Obetrol’s position in the narrative, as the first event he recounts? Does this suggest it is more than a stepping stone? Should we think that without this “first glimmer” the successive experiences leading up to his ‘final’ conversion would not have been possible? Or rather should we suggest that it is these subsequent events which give the first one shape and invest it with significance? The Christian girl’s story offers one way of answering these questions.

1b. The Christian girl’s epiphany

The Christian girl’s story begins with an intermediary disclaimer: “these sorts of unexpected things can happen in all sorts of different ways, and it’s dangerous to make too much of them” (209). It is intermediary because it is placed between the episode concerning Fogle’s father’s death and the girl’s narration of her moment of conversion, and as such appears to reflect on the former (and its influence on Fogle’s life) and anticipate the latter. That the particular nature of the disclaimer – his doubtfulness about the mode of

storytelling he is engaged in – appears poised between just-narrated events and soon-to-be-narrated events has the effect of lessening its reference to specific, individual events and highlighting its narrative purpose. If he uses it to draw parallels between other individuals' stories and his own, the fact that Fogle is poised between fidelity to his felt sense of conversion and an awareness of the importance of this sense's communication leads him to engage in a form of prolepsis Mark Currie describes as "rhetorical" (2007, 29). Rhetorical prolepsis, Currie explains, is that which involves "the anticipation of an objection to an argument" by including such objections in one's own narrative (2007, 29). As we will see, this rhetorical prolepsis bespeaks a greater uncertainty on Fogle's part about the relationship between the event of conversion and its narration.

In a Fogelian touch, the girl contextualizes her story by setting it "on a certain day an unspecified amount of time before, a day when she said she was feeling totally desolate and lost and nearly at the end of her rope, sort of wandering aimlessly in the psychological desert of our younger generation's decadence and materialism and so on and so forth" (211). Though Fogle is suspicious that this may be a retrospective embellishment on her part, used in order to give greater persuasive power to her "'salvation'" (214), it is the same sort of generational contextualization Fogle gives his own story. While the "so on and so forth" here suggests a certain weary familiarity with this technique, he will nonetheless acknowledge such parallels. In fact, the extent to which such acknowledgement occurs leads us to question how much of Fogle's narration of the girl's story comes from her original telling of it – he claims that he is relaying a "clear, detailed memory" (210) of her story – and how much of it is the result of his unstated editorializing intent. It is certainly true that the elements of the tale Fogle chooses to relay privilege the parallels with his own over a commitment to comprehensive reportage. For instance he shifts quickly from the generalized cultural context ("so on and so forth") to a description of the girl turning for no apparent reason into the church's parking lot, a depiction of mindlessness very similar to Fogle's own reason-less turn into the accountancy classroom in which he encounters the substitute teacher. Indeed, his acknowledgement that there are in the girl's story "certain parallels with my own case" (212) comes with no examples for a further few pages, an elision which suggests both that these parallels are not in fact restricted to specific ("certain") examples but are actually more general, and asks us to read her story in light of how it might reflect on his own. (He confirms this a little while later when he says that the substitute's speech "was ultimately much more like the evangelist girlfriend[s] own experience than I could have ever admitted at the time" [220]).

As such, this passage works as a “signpost” both within Fogle’s story and as a reflection on it, directing Fogle towards hearing the substitute teacher’s exhortation in a similar way as well as reminding the reader to be aware of his narrative as one of a similar conversion to the girl’s.

His breathless gloss of her epiphany – “[she] testified as to how she had been stunned and deeply moved, and said she had instantly felt a huge, dramatic spiritual change deep inside of her in which she said she felt completely reassured and unconditionally known and loved, and as though now suddenly her life had meaning and direction to it after all” (212) – indicates that Fogle’s interest is less in the moment of epiphany itself (indeed there is no real interrogation of the actual quality of it), and more in the methods of narrating one. The Christian girl’s story is significant for Fogle mainly because it educates him in narrative form, and he dwells on it in order to provide an analysis of the sort of conversion narrative he himself is narrating. Fogle criticizes the girl’s story for providing only a climactic experience of the moment of epiphany separated from the context in which it happened:

What the girl ... left out of the story was why she was so psychologically ‘primed’ to hear the pastor’s general, anonymous comment in that personal way ... all she really told was her little story’s dramatic climax, which was the preacher’s comment and the sudden inward changes she felt as a result, which is a little like telling just the punch line of a joke and expecting the person to laugh. (214)

Although he is famed for being ‘Irrelevant,’ Fogle has, it seems, learnt this lesson; the narrative in which we read this criticism of the narration of the moment of conversion is one in which Fogle ensures we learn in exhaustive detail how he himself was “psychologically ‘primed’” to hear the teacher’s call to heroic accountancy. It is here that we get a first glimpse of the problem that defines Fogle’s narrative: having since experienced his own conversion, Fogle feels that narratives like the girl’s place too much emphasis on the moment of change at the expense of the various contexts that lead to that moment happening. The power of “enormous, sudden, dramatic, unexpected, life-changing experiences,” Fogle explains, “isn’t just a result of the experience itself, but also of the circumstances in which it hits you, of everything in your previous life-experience which has led up to it and made you exactly who and what you are when the experience hits you” (214). In other words, these sorts of experiences rarely make sense when narrated in an isolated fashion; they need to be contextualized. This anxiety isn’t just Fogle’s, it is also

Wallace's. Of a story in his 1999 collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, Wallace remarks:

The big reason to have 'Adult World II' in outline form is that for myself as a reader I don't buy epiphanies done dramatically anymore. You know: 'She gazed out the window. Suddenly, the revelation hit her face.' I begin wincing when I'm reading shit like that. I don't think readers can buy epiphanies anymore ... I like stuff that's moving, but I don't want to be perceived as manipulative, and I don't like to be manipulative (Arden, 98)

Of course in both that short story and this section from *The Pale King* Wallace is doing an epiphany dramatically. In the Fogle section he even enumerates a *series* of them. Yet it is also Wallace's ambivalence in this interview – the desire to retain the transformative and emotional experience of the epiphany despite suspicion of its isolated narration – that Fogle exhibits. Indeed, his analysis of the girl's story comes from a wariness of letting such manipulation go unremarked upon. In so doing, and in calling for a wider narration that takes in "everything in your previous life-experience which has led up to" the epiphany, he identifies a kind of temporal paradox. In order for an epiphany to be truly valuable – to truly be an epiphany – it must be placed within a temporal and narrative scheme that admits of something we might call extendability or continuity. And, Fogle seems to imply, it must come with appropriately embedded acknowledgement of the perils of narrating such an experience.

1c. The substitute teacher's exhortation

Inasmuch as hearing the substitute teacher's speech is both the focus and the climax of his story, Fogle proleptically refers to "the dramatic event that I remember totally changing my focus and attitude" (175) a number of times before fully narrating it. The reader is aware that the events they are reading about lead up to a "dramatic encounter" (176) that Fogle now recognizes as "one of the most unexpectedly powerful, galvanizing events of my life at that time" (190), namely wandering into the wrong classroom and hearing an end-of-term summation by a substitute teacher who resembled a Jesuit or someone from Fogle's father's generation. This substitute expounds on the "heroic" (229) nature of tax accountancy, one which requires, like the politics studied in Fogle's intended class ("American Political Thought" [217]), "courage" (229) "[e]ffacement", "[s]acrifice",

“[s]ervice” (231) and “commitment” (228).

Much like he did with the Christian girl’s story, Fogle begins the narration of his own moment of conversion with a caveat, declaring that

[t]o this day, I can never be totally sure whether stumbling into the wrong building’s 311 right before final exams might not just have been one more bit of unconscious irresponsibility on my part. You cannot analyze sudden, dramatic experiences like this this way, though – especially in hindsight, which is notoriously tricky (though obviously I did not understand this during the exchange with the Christian girl[])
(216)⁵⁷

It is not immediately clear what this “way” Fogle refers to is, though it seems that he is anxious that his narrative might be criticized for reading too much significance into what are really coincidental events and/or that with hindsight he is retrospectively viewing every event that happened prior to his conversion as essential to the final outcome. The tensions Fogle himself highlighted in his analysis of the Christian girl’s story resurface in his own, along with a recurrence of his anxiety about narrating conversion experiences. Indeed if his repeated comparisons of his own story to the Christian girl’s revealed his need to establish a precedent for his own but also help him to understand and articulate the narrative form of the conversion tale, his criticisms of her understanding of her tale also seem to place sufficient doubt in his mind as to the efficacy of the form that he incorporates further contextual information to firm up his story, namely his experience one afternoon a few days prior to his final conversion of watching the soap opera *As The World Turns* and

⁵⁷ Interestingly, his awareness of narrative form extends to his experience in the substitute’s classroom. Remarking that “I was probably more aware of the effects the lecture seemed to be having on me than of the lecture itself” (219) he acknowledges that this was mostly because he didn’t understand the content of the lecture (he is not at that point an accountancy student). If he was instead struck by the lecture’s form and its methods of persuasion and inspiration rather than its particular content, this seems to mark a difference between Fogle’s and the Christian girl’s story. In the latter, the priest used non-technical speech that anyone could understand. This was part of Fogle’s own criticism of the story, suggesting that this use of everyday language contributed to the girl’s feeling of direct address in the way the vague generalities of horoscopes convince readers they are written just for them, when “pretty much every red-blooded American in today’s (then) late-Vietnam and Watergate era felt desolate and disillusioned and unmotivated and directionless and lost” (213); the priest, Fogle implies, was hedging his bets. Yet it is when the substitute’s speech moves away from technical matters of accountancy and begins to speak in general terms of heroism and endurance (Fogle remarks that “I was immediately aware that he didn’t seem to be talking about the Advanced Tax final exam” [227]) that Fogle comes to feel “singled out” (227). The difference between Fogle’s and the girl’s experience, then, is not so much that the substitute spoke in more specific terms than the priest, but that Fogle recognizes the interaction of form and content, which ensures he is very much aware of narrative structure when it comes to narrating his own tale.

being struck by the literal fact of the TV announcer saying “‘*You’re watching As the World Turns*’” (222). His reason for interrupting the story of his final conversion to insert this anecdote is that “through just the 2,235-word story of a memory, I could never convince anybody else that the innate, objective quality of the substitute’s lecture would also have glued anybody else to their seat” (220). Although he hints that maybe more words will do the trick, Fogle is profoundly concerned that he will never, no matter how many words he uses, be able to fully communicate his experience. “I can, though,” he says, “at least help explain why I was so ‘primed’ for experiencing it this way” (220). Here Fogle confronts the possibility of a hole at the centre of his narrative: the conversion itself. The nearer his narrative gets to it the more anxious he becomes about narrating it. Attempting to solve the problem of conversion, Fogle, like Rousseau in his *Confessions*, “pile[s] up” (Brooks, 32) narrative context, some of it germane, some of it ‘Irrelevant’. In this sense, Peter Brooks’ remarks about Rousseau are equally applicable to Fogle, whose “narrative layerings suggest a failure” of communication (32): “he is always going back over the traces of conduct and interior disposition, not to reconcile them ... but to confess their irreconcilability ... the only ordering or solution to the problem in understanding Rousseau has set up here is more narrative” (32). We will see later in this chapter how reconciliation becomes important for both Fogle and Wallace, and while we might mark a slight difference between Fogle and Rousseau – the former simultaneously despairs of irreconcilability and attempts reconciliation – it is true that the only narration Fogle can engage in with confidence is the description of events surrounding, referring to and presaging the central conversion experience itself; in short, narrative layering. As he remarked in his criticisms of the Christian girl’s story, part of the reason for this is the specific, personal nature of these experiences, yet this specificity does not seem to be limited to those experiences themselves but spreads into the contexts Fogle is keen to give. Presenting us with a chain of occurrences that lead to his conversion, Fogle relies on the reader’s ability to recognize in both the events and the form of his story a familiar enough experience that he or she understands both the generalized structure of such an experience and the particularity of the significance of the teacher’s speech to Fogle.

These problems Fogle faces are compounded by the relation between the time of the narrated events and the time of the narration itself, which we touched on earlier. If Fogle suspects that the only way he can truly communicate the felt sense and effect of his conversion is by piling up contextual information on either side of it, the fact that he begins this task five years after the event poses a question about the end of his narrative: have the

events he is narrating ended? If so, when did they end and what contributed to them ending? If not, how can he negotiate the communication of contextual information that is still ongoing? His uncertainty about the ending can be seen in the remark we noted earlier which establishes how long he's been working for the IRS: "The truth is that most of what I really know about myself I learned in the Service ... I've been here five years, and I've learned an incredible amount" (165). The unstable relation between continuation and ending is here visible at the level of tense. The current truth is that most of what Fogle knows (in the present) about himself he learned (in the past) in the Service, which he *continues* to work for. *So far*, the implication runs, he has been employed by the IRS for five years, and *so far* he has learned an incredible amount. But presumably, given his continued infatuation with the Service, he will *continue* to work for them and *continue* to learn more. The use of the present perfect continuous "I've been here" registers the uncertain ending to his narrative. What's more, given Fogle's tendency towards the contextual pile-up we've been examining, it is possible to conceive of this problem itself continuing, perhaps even escalating, as he continues to move away temporally from the moment of conversion.

In his struggle to wrestle the raw material of his experience into a narrative, Fogle's sentences sometimes strain at causality. In the midst of his digression about *As the World Turns*, Fogle remarks: "But the point was that I realized, on some level, that whatever a potentially 'lost soul' was, I was one – and it wasn't cool or funny. And, as mentioned, it was only a few days later that I mistakenly ended up across the transom in the final-class session of Advanced Tax" (224). The first sentence, which is the culmination of a rumination on the serious realities of his hip lifestyle (it "was, in reality, not funny, not one bit funny, but rather frightening, in fact, or sad" [223]), relies on affect, on the build-up of a sense of honest self-assessment that reveals his true self and leaves it open to humiliation and judgment. The second, by contrast, merely notes the factual occurrence that a few days later he stumbled into the wrong class. Placed together, it is difficult not to read the first sentence as the cause of the second (which is what Fogle wants us to think). On the other hand, the isolation of these two sentences – one describing a psychological realization about his lifestyle, the other describing a physical action – makes it just as easy to read them as coincidence. That these two sentences are separate yet bear the rather clumsy marks of Fogle's attempt at connection (the second sentence's opening "And, as mentioned") is indicative of the strain Fogle is placing his narrative under.

The particular character of continuation, and its relationship with moments that might threaten it, is also dwelt on by the substitute teacher. In his exhortation, he tells the students that “the heroism of your childhood entertainments was not true valor” (229). Rather, “[t]rue heroism is you, alone, in a designated work space” (230), and “real courage” is “[e]nduring tedium over real time in a confined space” (229). Entertainment produces heroism as a spectacle, “[t]he grand gesture, the moment of choice, the mortal danger, the external foe, the climactic battle whose outcome resolves all – all designed to appear heroic, to excite and gratify an audience” (229). Here, then, the teacher directly calls into question the conversion narrative and provides his own critique of Fogle’s story, much as Fogle did for the Christian girl’s. In fact they both make the same point: these moments don’t tell the real story, which is concerned less with audience and climax than with “tedium” and context. The substitute’s words help us to understand more clearly the narratorial importance of Obetrol for Fogle. If his initial experiences with the drug allow him to experience “glimmers” of awareness, then these experiences become contextual referents for later, similar ones. At the beginning of his anecdote about *As the World Turns*, for example, he makes a point of noting that he wasn’t taking Obetrol at the time, mainly because the event he describes – “I suddenly realized that the [TV] announcer was actually saying over and over what I was literally doing” (222) – is so much like Obetrol that confusion could ensue. He even repeats the fact that “I was not Obetrolling at this moment of awareness” (222) immediately after describing it. After stumbling into the accountancy class and getting drawn in by the teacher, he again becomes “aware of how every detail in the classroom appeared very vivid and distinct” (230), experiencing a kind of doubling, only without Obetrol. Clearly such repetition serves to confer upon the awareness first gained on Obetrol a particular importance, yet ‘awareness’ doesn’t encompass the entirety of Fogle’s meaning, because it is more than a passive recognition of a problem. Rather, Fogle gains the critical capacity to interrogate the world around him in a way he hasn’t done before and becomes able to choose, discern and make judgments. He confirms this in the affective speech we touched upon above. Realizing that he “drifted and quit because nothing meant anything, no one choice was really better” (223), he understands that

I was, in a way, too free, or that this kind of freedom wasn’t actually real – I was free to choose ‘whatever’ because it didn’t really matter. But that this, too, was because of something I chose – I had somehow chosen to have nothing matter ... If I wanted to matter – even just to myself – I would have to be less free, by deciding to choose in some kind of definite way. (223-4)

If this comes towards the culmination of Fogle's conversion narrative, then the discussion of choice is enlightening for the entire tale. Towards the end of the affective speech, he phrases the same sentiments in a slightly different way: his experience of watching *As The World Turns*, he tells us, "was part of what put me in a position ... to hear something that changed my direction" (224). Conversion thus understood isn't entirely unwitting; rather than simply being something that happens *to* someone, the convert has to be in some way open to its possibility, partly through choice but also because of certain *a priori* characteristics. For Fogle, despite all the dramatic events that happen to him and which lead him toward pursuing tax accountancy, at one point he wonders whether his choice is really down to statistical factors:

The fact is that there are probably just certain kinds of people who are drawn to a career in the IRS. People who are, as the substitute father said that final day in Advanced Tax, 'called to account.' Meaning we are talking about almost a special kind of psychological type, probably. It's not a very common type – perhaps one in 10,000 ... And there are no doubt core characteristics that these people have in common, predictive factors which at some point or other kick in and cause a genuine calling to pursue tax accounting (176)

With these remarks, Fogle asks the reader to reassess the entire narrative thus far. The events that have led up to the point of conversion – Obetrol, the Christian girl's story, *As the World Turns* – are preparatory in the sense that they lead up to the final conversion, but they also formulate it less as a revelation out of the blue and more as a slow opening up to the possibility of conversion. In this particular case, that slow opening up can only be undergone by a small number of people whose psychological type predisposes them to opening up in the first place. One does not, as we wondered above, go from 'before I was this' to 'after I was this' simply. Rather, in Fogle's case, the Obetrol sets in motion the process of becoming aware that culminates in the conversion. Fogle sleepwalks through most of his life until university, where his experiences on Obetrol alert him to the possibility of a different way of living. Although these glimpses are brief, they are also initiatory (and even possibly irreversible), and he begins to experience this sort of awareness for increasingly frequent and lengthier periods. The experience in the classroom, listening to the teacher's speech, is final insofar as it clarifies these moments of awareness and directs them toward a particular course of action, but it can also be interpreted as the first event inasmuch as the entire process has been preparation for the real work, as the

teacher puts it, of “minutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care – with no one there to see or cheer ... Just you and the job, at your desk” (230).

This raises a curious question: given the wealth of context Fogle feels he needs to explain his conversion, which includes this idea of a slow “waking up” to the world’s possibilities, and given Fogle’s apparent inability to truly communicate or describe his actual conversion, his narrative seems in some way to actually admit the impossibility of conversion. Indeed, his description of the moment most recognizably conversion-like doesn’t entirely conform to our expectations:

It seemed then that a sudden kind of shudder went through the room, or maybe an ecstatic spasm, communicating itself from senior accounting major or graduate business student to senior accounting major or grad business student so rapidly that the whole collective seemed for an instant to heave – although, again, I am not a hundred percent sure this was real, that it took place outside of me, in the actual classroom, and the (possible) collective spasm’s moment was too brief to be more than sort of fleetingly aware of it (230-1)

Two things are important here. Firstly, this experience is collective rather than individual. Fogle has spent time repeating the ineluctably personal and individual nature of these types of life-changing conversion experiences, as we have seen. Although this moment reaffirms the religious quality of such experiences, the “ecstatic spasm” sounding rather like the “flickers of deeper awareness” or the “sacred” blazing we noted above, its collective nature is something new to Fogle’s narrative and is something he doesn’t expand on. Secondly, Fogle casts doubt on the very existence of the shudder or spasm because it is not corroborated by others, because it might *just* have happened to him. In connecting these two points, he creates a paradox around the idea of conversion: the possibility that this was a collective experience is on the one hand a way of guaranteeing its reality, a verification that it wasn’t just his subjective impression, but if it was collective, then it can’t be his real conversion because it is no longer the specific, personal experience he has spent the narrative thus far maintaining is a characteristic of conversion. The potential impossibility of conversion, then, is explicitly connected to the problems of narration Fogle has charted throughout: how can one be sure of the reality of an experience when it is defined as personal and subjective to the extent that any external or objective corroboration of that

experience is impossible, because that personal and subjective nature is such that it cannot be communicated entirely to others? Furthermore, the moment in which the event occurs compounds this problem by being “too brief to be more than sort of fleetingly aware of.” Yet, as we noted above, something *has* changed. Fogle feels a different person now than he was before, and certainly acts in a different way. When he says that “I discovered I had them – the factors and characteristics” that make someone take up tax accountancy and be good at and enjoy it (177), he displays nothing short of the zealous certainty of the convert, who having undergone conversion is convinced that he was always destined to be what he now is. The changes that compose the narrative of conversion, then, actually mask a deeper conviction on the part of the convert that in more important ways he has not changed at all. As Peter Brooks puts it, once again speaking of Rousseau: “while claiming multiple beginnings and ends, he also asserts that he has never changed” (33).⁵⁸

We have seen that what appears at first as a conversion narrative becomes also an enquiry into the possibility of both conversion itself and one’s ability to narrate it, and even admits of its potential impossibility. The substitute’s concluding exhortation – “Gentlemen, you are called to account” (233) – is a pun insofar as it plays on a double-meaning of the word ‘account’ – accountancy-as-profession and the fidelity to a cause the substitute wishes to instil in his students – but we also detect a third meaning, one which resonates with Fogle just as much as the other two: he is being called to account for his conversion, to make sense of it, to, in the words of Astrid in *Arcadia*, “find the reason” for it. As we have seen, however, Fogle struggles to establish a firm position between his conviction that something did change and his doubts about communicating that conviction, which come in part from the personal nature of the change but also from his inability to pinpoint when it

⁵⁸ Fogle muses on the mechanics of change in relation not just to himself but to his mother and father. He remarks that “I do not really do my most important thinking in large, intentional blocks where I sit down uninterrupted in a chair and know in advance what it is I’m going to think about” (190) but rather the “most important thinking” happens in “incidental, accidental, almost daydreamy ways” (190) while he is engaged in another task altogether. He notes that this experience is probably “universal” (191) but it’s “not something you can ever really talk to anyone else about because it ends up being so abstract and hard to explain” (191). This is in some ways another Fogle disclaimer, like the one at the start of the Christian girl’s story, stemming from his worry about communicating the reality of his conversion. Change happens accidentally, which is probably a universal experience, but the particular content and character of that change defies description. When he considers his father’s life, Fogle even countenances the possibility that the paths people follow are not due to any sort of change at all but rather “proceed on autopilot,” in which “there are certain things that have to be done and you simply have to do them” (191). He contrasts such stoicism with the way his mother “changed her life’s direction very dramatically” (192). Fogle thinks his mother considered herself not only to have experienced change, but to have initiated it herself in “a conscious change of life-philosophy,” although he suggests that these changes were less a result of “concentrated thinking” but rather “emotionally driven” (192), an embrace of what made her feel right at the time.

occurred. In other words, he faces a paradox of believing and doubting in his own conversion. For Brooks, Rousseau discovers that “the very point of the discrepancy between the narrative of actions and narrative of internal dispositions” – what happened, and his “inner feelings and motives” in relation to what happened – “is their fundamental lack of congruence, the inability of either ever fully to coincide with or explain the other” (32). If the lack of congruence in Fogle’s tale is between his certainty that he did experience conversion and the uncertainty with which he communicates it, and if as a result he both asserts and doubts his conversion, he also places this dilemma in the context of broader historical narratives around him, narratives which illuminate another resonance of the word ‘account,’ namely accountability. In a recent review of Jacob Soll’s *The Reckoning: Financial Accountability and the Rise and Fall of Nations*, Andrew Benedict-Nelson describes accountability as “an enormous missing concept in our debates over market and state,” something “one could define as the capacity for citizens to read the financial code of the public and private programs that govern their lives” (Benedict-Nelson). Benedict-Nelson commends Soll’s book for re-introducing the concept because “it’s a capacity that requires both a financially literate public as well as institutions that can tolerate an audit.” In other words, it requires a conception of citizenship Wallace – and Fogle – view as missing in late twentieth and early twenty-first century America, one in which a “mutual relationship” between state, corporations and citizens helps all take responsibility for “how much is being spent on the various activities of government.” If Fogle struggles in some way to ‘account’ for his personal conversion, it takes place in a cultural context in which the concept of ‘accountability’ – i.e.: responsible citizenship – is under threat. Fogle’s relationship to this context is the focus of the next part of this chapter.

2. Fogle and the 1970s

Published in 1975 and based on lectures delivered in 1971, Robert N. Bellah’s *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* is dedicated to examining problems of American society crystallized and exacerbated by events in the 1960s and ‘70s, a period he describes as “America’s third time of trial” (136).⁵⁹ In it he describes the “religious-moral” (xvi) basis of American society. If the early Puritans demanded personal, individual conversion, “[i]n addition to th[is] inward covenant there was also the outward or national covenant to which all New Englanders were conceived of as belonging or at least to which

⁵⁹ The first two were the “revolutionary crisis of the Atlantic world in the late 18th century,” particularly America’s “struggle for independence and the institution of liberty,” and the Civil War (1).

they were subject. This was the basis of civil society. Ideally, individual conversion and external covenant should go together” (18). This covenant was seen as a way of “balanc[ing]” the “liberating experience” of conversion – which led some to antinomianism – with “a definite set of obligations between God and man and between man and man” (19). Key was this: “Conversion was not just an act of purely private piety” (20). Rather, while it was certainly a prize, “conversion was not only a reward – rebirth into eternal life. It also entailed an obligation – to walk in the ways of the Lord” (61). Bellah’s book charts a history of America in which this covenant, elaborated originally by John Winthrop – “the first leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, on board ship in 1630 even before landing in the new world” (13) – “was broken almost as soon as it was made” (139) by, among other things, the existence of slavery, by imperialism, and by the narrowing of the word ‘success’ so that it meant something “singularly literal ... success in business, or more crassly, money” (73).⁶⁰ For Bellah, from his vantage point in the early 1970s, the only way to “transcend the limitations of American culture and society” is through the (re-)discovery and (re-)adoption of

an imaginative vision that can generate an experience of inner conversion and lead to a new form of covenant. Liberation without any sense of constitution will surely be self-defeating. The perils of late 20th-century America will not be overcome by everyone doing his or her “own thing,” but through the discovery of cultural and social forms that can give the disciplined basis for a new degree of moral freedom. (86)

If, then, conversion comes with a degree of risk – and we will see how conversions in those other than Fogle embody its perils – Bellah’s description of a kind of conversion which requires a further covenant with the convert’s fellow man, something he calls “a balance of concern between the individual and his community” (124), acts as a useful conceptual touchstone for us when asking what kind of conversion Fogle’s is because

⁶⁰ Bellah quotes Winthrop’s sermon at length, but the key extract for our purposes is as follows: “Wee are entered into a Covenant with [God] for this worke, wee have taken out a Commission, the Lord hath given us leave to draw our owne Articles, wee have professed to enterprise these Accions upon these and these ends, wee have hereupon besought him of favour and blessing: Now if the Lord shall please to heare us, and bring us in peace to the place wee desire, then hath hee ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission (and) will expect a strickt performance of the Articles contained in it, but if wee shall neglect the observacion of these Articles which are the ends wee have propounded, and dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnall intencions seekeing greate things for our selves and our posterity, the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against us, be revenged of such a perjured people and make us knowe the price of the breache of such a Covenant” (14).

Bellah's description seems to speak to the way it leads to a renewed sense of moral, civic-minded citizenship. Furthermore, it is through the establishment of this sort of covenant that Wallace links Fogle's "purely private" conversion with larger national histories.

Scattered throughout his narrative, Fogle provides us with a comprehensive chronology of the events that surround and contribute to his conversion: his family's "relocat[ion] to the Chicagoland area in 1964" (173), his mother's "nervous breakdown in 1971" (192) and the "abrupt changes of 1971-72" (205) which led to his "parents split[ting] up in February 1972" (166); hearing the Christian girl's story in "1973 or '74" (228); "the UIC campus where [he] spent a joyless and hypocritical 1975-76 school year" (239); his age in "October or November 1976" being twenty-one (168); the "1977 disaster of the State of Illinois's experiment with making the state sales tax a progressive tax" (162); his re-enrollment at university in "the fall of '77" (175); his father's death in "December 1977" (167); passing Intro Accounting in "the Fall 1978 semester" (176); the substitute's speech "two weeks before Christmas 1978" (225); his "early January 1979" (236) trip to the IRS recruiting office; his "entering the Service in 1979" (189); and the "changes in the 1980s" to "the Service's concept of efficiency" (247).⁶¹ This assiduousness, in addition to his evocation of the cultural atmosphere of the seventies through pop cultural signifiers and hazy memories of politicians, suggests that Fogle is keen to relate his personal story to national history in general and to narratives of the American seventies in particular. If one reason for this is his need to situate his personal and unique experience in a larger context, I think it also points towards the significance Wallace intends Fogle's narrative to have.

There are similarities between the doubt Fogle expresses about his conversion and the historiography of the decade in which his narrative is set. These histories have had to confront the general sense that nothing really happened in the decade; Peter N. Carroll's 1982 book *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* puts it succinctly. More recent work has attempted to revise this initial impression: Bruce J. Schulman's *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (2001), Edward D. Berkowitz's *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (2006) and Andreas Killen's *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America* (2006) all suggest that the

⁶¹ It is perhaps this sort of attention to dates that makes Fogle a good interpreter of "Title 26 of the Code of Federal Regulations and the Revised Internal Revenue Code of 1954, plus all the statutes and regulations entailed by the Tax Reform Act of 1969, the Tax Reform Act of 1976, [and] the Revenue Act of 1978, and so on and so forth" (177).

decade represents a particular turning point in American history.⁶² If these histories find themselves acting on two fronts – interrogating those early impressions of “nothing happening” while asserting that something did – they are fronts which recall Fogle’s struggle to narrate and communicate something he feels certain happened. The seventies, then, emerges as a decade of transformation but also one of contradiction and uncertainty, something registered early on in Carroll’s title: if “tragedy” implies an identifiable (downward) trajectory, “promise” points towards alternative possibilities, while the duality exhibited by these later histories is prefigured in the modulation of “nothing happened” by “seemed.” Carroll’s book leaves open two possibilities: either really nothing happened, or it just “seemed” that way and something did, even if it remains hard to identify.

Stephen Paul Miller’s *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (1999) confronts this tension directly. If he insists that “[w]e must understand that something happened in the seventies” (365) it eludes easy interpretation; instead we must “grapple with” it (365-6). Furthermore, the confusion and tension between something happening and nothing happening is for Miller the defining question of the seventies itself, not just its histories. For Miller the decade asks the question “[h]ow do we recognize “reality” and form a consensus regarding the “truth”?” (114), one at the root of the surveillance he sees as a characteristic cultural and political trope of the period – Killen calls it a “master narrative...” (7) – which saw “a movement from external to internal surveillance” (1). That Fogle’s narrative is a video-taped account of his life undertaken in 1984, the final year of Schulman’s “long 1970s” (4), seems in this context to epitomize this movement from external to internal – Fogle is “surveilled” by a camera associated with a branch of the government of which Fogle himself is a part, and the occasion leads him to examine his own history. If increased internal and self-surveillance is for Miller a key atmospheric

⁶² Schulman writes that accounts of the decade which suggested that it “accomplished nothing worth remembering ... could hardly be more wrong” (xii) but accepts that “[t]he task of the historian writing about the 1970s seems much less clear. Most Americans regard the Seventies as an eminently forgettable decade” (xi-xii). Killen notes that “these years still need to be liberated from the two decades that bracket them” in order to examine the decade “on its own terms, as a distinct cultural moment, a moment of rupture and discontinuity in American history” (1). Berkowitz traces a series of schools of thought from the “nothing-happened ... school of historians [who] wrote close to the events of the era” through a conservative revisionism that claimed that “the seventies reversed the great dreams of the sixties ... in a positive way that led to the great American revival in the 1980s” to “a final transformation” which claims less ideologically that the seventies were “an important era in their own right” (5). In a review of two more books on the American 1970s in the *London Review of Books* (Judith Stein’s *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the 1970s* and Jefferson Cowie’s *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*), Steve Fraser notes that “[i]t was in this decade that the American (and global) economy embarked on its fateful transformation from industrial to finance-driven capitalism and that the American working class underwent a makeover that would soon render it virtually invisible. And it was during this decade that the labour question was asked for the last time” (23).

condition of the cultural artefacts of the decade, which themselves bespeak a national process of self-examination, other historians agree that the seventies was characterized more by inward, psychological changes than the assassinations, wars, and protest movements that marked its predecessor. That many of these changes were not fully identified until the 1980s contributed to the impression of a quiet decade.⁶³

Schulman tries to identify the reasons for this inward turn, writing that

[f]or generations, American politics and culture had acted like a universal solvent: dissolving ethnic and regional loyalties, diluting sectarian strife and religious enthusiasm, concealing unbridgeable generation gaps behind a forever young facade. But in the seventies, this melting pot gave way, in one astute observer's words, "to a centrifuge" that spun the nation's communities around "and distributed them across the landscape according to new principles." Americans chased new pasts, new futures, new Gods – and they chased them by and for themselves. (80)

There is something of Bellah's national covenant in Schulman's "universal solvent," and both writers view the seventies as marked by disintegrating national stories. Fogle, as we shall see, is both – and perhaps contradictorily – emblematic of this seventies environment and utterly opposed to it: if he undergoes a change (a conversion founded, as conversions are, on a "new past" and "new future") that leads him to adopt a "new God" in the form of a kind of enlightened citizenship, that change runs entirely counter to the broader political trends of the period, Fogle's new future one in which the "solvent" of civic-mindedness arrests the individualist trends – what Bellah calls "utilitarian morality of self-interest" (xx) – around him. One writer who analyzed the effects of these explorations by a "generation of seekers" (Wade C. Roof, quoted by Schulman, 99) was Christopher Lasch, and his book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*, published in 1979, is particularly useful in understanding the aspects of Fogle's narrative that make it both emblematic of the seventies and entirely at odds with it.

Lasch suggested that the seventies was characterized by the dissolution of sixties promise into a narcissistic culture. "People bus[ied] themselves ... with survival strategies, measures designed to prolong their own lives, or programs guaranteed to ensure good

⁶³ Schulman notes that the early eighties "represented the culmination of a decade-long ideological shift" (220) in American life.

health and peace of mind” in response to an erosion of faith in collective solutions – be they through government or political movements – and a growing and “commonplace” fear of “[i]mpending disaster” (4) through nuclear apocalypse or ecological disaster. He saw a widespread cultivation of personal image as part of a “therapeutic sensibility” (7) which displaced politics as well as religion and “turn[ed] collective grievances into personal problems amenable to therapeutic intervention” (13-4). For Lasch, this was indicative of a “moral climate of contemporary society” defined by “self-absorption” and characterized, among other things, by “[t]he popularization of psychiatric modes of thought” and “the spread of the “new consciousness movement,” ... which ... give added urgency to the quest for spiritual panaceas” (25).

One might find in Fogle’s portrayal of his mother an example of these forces in action. From the beginning of his narrative, Fogle sets up an opposition in parental approach between his “dry, sardonic [and] reserved” father and his more “sympathetic” mother, who in parental disagreements over their son’s direction claims that “I [Fogle] was trying to find my path in life, and that not every path is outlined in neon lights like an airport runway, and that I owed it to myself to find my path and let things unfold in their own way” (156). His outline of his mother’s narrative is one in which she has an “identity crisis ... in 1972” (172-3) and separates from his father, becoming a lesbian and getting involved in “consciousness-raising and ... the women’s lib movement of the 1970s” (160) before suffering a breakdown after Fogle’s father’s death five years later, moving back into the family home and spending her days feeding the neighbourhood birds, becoming less and less communicative. In Fogle’s telling, his mother’s decisions and actions embody a cultural climate in which the socially-focused radicalism of the 1960s gives way to the therapeutic individuality of the 1970s. Of his mother’s marijuana-smoking, for instance, he remarks that “it wasn’t exactly potent, but that wasn’t really the point, because with them [his mother and her partner Joyce] it was more of a sort of liberated political statement than a matter of getting high” (165). Similarly, his description of “listening to my mother and Joyce recount very vivid, detailed memories from their early childhoods, and both of them laughing and crying and stroking one another’s hair in emotional support” (166) suggests that for his mother the more social and collective elements of consciousness-raising (she runs a feminist bookstore during this period) are indistinguishable from more therapeutic attempts to “get me to see her as changing and growing up right there with me” (166). Lasch called this growing emphasis on the imagery or pose of political commitment a “theatrics of politics” (71). Yet this confusion between the types of activism associated

with the sixties and their seventies descendants is not the result of Fogle's mother's misreading of the aims of the movements she becomes involved in but rather a sign that her introduction to these movements comes as the sixties emphasis on social problems and collective solutions gives way to what Jerry Rubin called the "inner revolution of the seventies" (quoted by Lasch, 15). That such involvement leaves her unequipped to deal with the trauma and "unresolved emotions and conflicts" (*TPK*, 207) of Fogle's father's death can be read as an indictment not of the move inward per se but of the way its concern with image left under-developed methods of dealing with emotional problems and traumas. Fogle's mother's narrative exhibits both the perils of embracing therapies of personal growth which remained only superficially able to aid emotional development, and the separation of 'liberated' political behaviour from actual, communal- or socially-focused political programs. In tandem, these mark the period in which "sixties activism gives way to the minority politics of the seventies" (*SN*, 244).⁶⁴ While Fogle doesn't consciously find fault with his mother, the fact that his narrative places, as we shall see, such emphasis on reconciliation with the father appears to encode a larger rejection of what, by the mid-1970s, 'the sixties' has become (his own disaffected hipness and his room-mate's pose of freedom as much as his mother's theatrics of politics), in favour of the moral and civic virtues he associates with the 'pre-sixties' and his father.

If these parallels with seventies historiography hint at the historical situatedness of Fogle's narrative, his own history and transformation seems even more clearly a tale of the seventies. His conversion narrative sounds rather similar to the "[j]ourneys of discovery" Schulman notes were "commonplace" in the decade, "personal odysseys" (92) in which people sought "alternative institutions and spiritual renewal" (90). Fogle himself notes the similarities between the born again Christian girl's story and his own and Schulman notes that both evangelicals and New Agers "stressed personal conversion" (94). Yet Fogle's journey of discovery leads him to reject this type of individualist separatism and move in the opposite direction. If elements of his individual story appear emblematic of the seventies, their political and social implications are anything but. For Schulman, the virtue of reading the period as the "long 1970s" is that one can consider how the individual, social, and political tendencies of that decade were "crystallized and popularized" (249) by Reagan as "the gospel of privatization" (246). In turn, this helps us throw Fogle's narrative

⁶⁴ This movement is also dramatized – much less critically – in Spiotta's *Eat the Document* when Mary finds momentary safety in a consciousness-raising group and a woman-only commune, and in Sorrentino's *Trance*, in which the break-up of the SLA is partly due to its troubled gender politics – Tania, Yolanda, Susan and Joan set up a women's commune and begin drafting a feminist manifesto.

into political relief. If for Schulman the “slow march of privatization ... pervaded the entire Seventies” (249), then Fogle’s own slow march – indicated by the timeline he provides of his experiences along the way to conversion – results in the embrace of ideals of civics and citizenship. As Marshall Boswell puts it, Fogle’s “conversion is the exact obverse of the conversions to Laffer [Curve, supply-side] economics that changed Dick Cheney, [Congressman] Jack Kemp, and Ronald Reagan” (474); the opposite, in other words, to the right-wing championing of markets over government and individuals over communities that put Reagan in the White House. Conversion, as Schulman notes, was a common trope of seventies culture, and Lasch too noted the “popularity of the confessional mode” (16) in literature of the late sixties and early seventies. Insofar as they dismissed civic imperatives in favour of the “god of the market” (Frank 2004, 172), these right-wing conversions of Cheney, Kemp and Reagan might be read as instances of the antinomianism Bellah sees the Puritans trying to restrain through their formulation of the covenant. In this sense, what distinguishes Fogle’s conversion, and what makes it “obverse” in a further sense, is that it comes with the adoption of this covenant. Indeed, if Bellah noted of the 1970s that a “profound experience of conversion, of the reordering of the deepest levels of the personality in the light of a transcendent vision ... is harder than ever to integrate with the dominant cultural mood” (85), that difficulty came from that mood’s threat to diminish just this experience of profundity by making conversion a “purely private” experience, not just because it partook only of personal growth or self-actualization but also because it inspired conversions to the neoliberal “gospel of privatization.”⁶⁵

2a. Fogle and the Fathers

Fogle’s opposite movement occurs within what Boswell describes as “a generational study” (475), one which filters through Fogle’s personal story wider concerns with post-war American society, the political and social legacies of the sixties and their effects in the seventies and eighties, and developments in government tax policy which themselves reveal shifts in America’s understanding of itself. The novel’s frequent uses of the phrase

⁶⁵ While there are some differences between Bellah’s conception of a “transcendent vision” – he is talking literally, in terms of God – and Fogle’s vision of civic responsibility, Wallace’s alignment of IRS examiners with the religious and the monastic, and the many individual instances of religious imagery in Fogle’s story (not least the fact that the exhortation is given by someone he thinks is a Jesuit) and in the novel as a whole, seems to indicate that Wallace wants us to identify Fogle’s conversion as a variety of religious experience. In addition, if Bellah is cheered by certain aspects of the countercultural search for alternative ways of social organization, in contrast to Lasch, he is only able to see these as such because of the “dominant cultural mood” in which such experiences are increasingly rare.

“generation gap”⁶⁶ centre on Fogle’s relationship with his father, to whom Fogle repeatedly refers. This has the effect of making Fogle’s father a sort of absent presence throughout the section, one to whom the narrative – Fogle’s confession – is in some way addressed.⁶⁷ This happens from the very first page. Attempting to describe his wastoid lifestyle, Fogle remarks “I had no motivation, which my father referred to as ‘initiative’” (154). Similarly his educational failures are seen primarily as occasions for fatherly disappointment: “incompletes peeved my father quite a bit more than a low grade,” “this routine wore thin with my father” (155). These opening corroboratory references establish a pattern repeated throughout the section, in which major, direct references to his father come before the minor dissenting opinions of his mother (“my mother was more sympathetic [than my father]” [156]).

One of the early references comes when Fogle describes attending a Jesuit university. He says: “My father, by the way, was raised as a Roman Catholic” (190). At this point the reference seems gratuitous; Fogle is not talking about his father but about the social and academic atmosphere at this particular university. The reader considers it one of the irrelevancies that give him his nickname. Later on, when musing on the mechanics of changing one’s life direction, he remarks: “As for my father, I have to admit that I don’t know how he did any of the major thinking that led him in the directions he followed all his life” (191). Once again, Fogle appears to be working on an unannounced logic that requires comparative references back to his father after descriptions of his own actions. This is present throughout: “my father, on the other hand” (165), “as my father said” (192), “[m]y father, by the way” (216). Any such logic is only obliquely referred to, with the caveat of a description of unconscious – i.e.: un-examined – processes: “part of the reason for coming home to Libertyville to cram may also have been to give my father an opportunity to watch me apply myself to serious studying on a weekend, *though I don’t remember being aware of this motivation at the time*” (197, my emphasis). In fact, it is not only Fogle’s motivations toward particular courses of action that are submerged in this manner, but Fogle’s imitation of his father’s actions: “*I doubt if it ever occurred to me that*

⁶⁶ Pages 166, 167, 168, 170, 190, 191, 192, and 211 all contain variations on the phrase, and, as I will come to argue, the substitute’s speech relies implicitly on it.

⁶⁷ In *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, Stephen J. Burn identifies a “fascination with dead ancestors” as a “preoccup[ation of] the post-postmodern generation” (97). Later he notes that Wallace described *Infinite Jest* as “a long encomium to the dead father” (125). Andreas Killen remarks that the 1970s was a decade that saw “a nation coping with, or celebrating, the symbolic death of the father” (8). One reading of Fogle’s narrative might be as an extended elaboration of the phrase “forgive me Father for I have sinned.”

the way I felt towards this roommate was probably the way my father felt about me” (165, my emphasis); “I remember for a second or two I could actually feel what he must have been feeling, and for an instant I saw myself through his eyes” (171); “[a]lmost as though I *unconsciously* sided with my father” (192, my emphasis).

Although Fogle tries to play down his father’s influence, at least initially, there are points where he acknowledges it,⁶⁸ and we will see how his relationship with his father informs the historical and contextual, not to mention political significance of Fogle’s narrative. Fogle’s hip lifestyle is invested with a personal, familial conflict that is simultaneously indicative of a broader generational one. As he puts it, “the same sort of dynamics were probably being played out in homes all over America.” Fogle’s father himself appears to see his relationship with his son in these terms. Fogle remembers that his father “sometimes referred to the so-called younger generation (meaning mine) as ‘This thing America hath wrought.’ ... It’s almost like he thought the blame went both ways, that there was something wrong with the whole country’s adults if they could produce kids like this in the 1970s” (168). If Fogle interprets this as an admission of fatherly fault, then it is one as common to the nation’s parents as Fogle’s wastoid lifestyle is to its children. That “in the 1970s” is important too: Fogle seems to be suggesting that the fault lies in the particular conjunction of these generational dynamics and the 1970s. Fogle – and, if his interpretation is correct, his father too – find fault in the cultural climate of the 1970s.

With the broadening of scope from the individual Fogle family to “homes all over America,” Fogle’s father becomes one of a series of father figures who are themselves representatives of a generation born, like Fogle’s father, in the 1930s Depression. One of Fogle’s references back to his father explicitly links him to one such figure, the Director of the IRS Regional Examination Center to which Fogle is posted, DeWitt Glendenning: “my father would have agreed with Mr. Glendenning’s statement that ‘Real freedom is freedom to obey the law’” (193). In this vein, it is significant that the university Fogle ends up graduating from (after enrolling and dropping out of a number in the Chicago area) is one

⁶⁸ The clearest example is his discussion of childhood memories, which is couched in the story of his parents’ divorce and his mother’s own conversion to lesbianism and feminist consciousness-raising: “when I tried hard to think of some of my own childhood memories, the only really vivid memory I could remember involved me pounding Glovolium into my Rawlings catcher’s mitt, which my father had gotten me, and that day of getting the Johnny Bench Autograph mitt I remembered very well, although Mom and Joyce’s was not the place to wax all sentimental about my father” (166). If the ostensible topic is his baseball glove, the real reason and ultimate referent for this memory’s solidity is his father. Fogle’s one “really vivid” memory of his childhood, his first memory of individual subjectivity, is one initiated by an act of his father’s.

run by “Jesuit father[s]” (216), and that the professor who gives the end-of-term exhortation is a “substitute ... filling in for the class’s real Jesuit father” (216). In this context, the father he is filling in for seems to be more Fogle’s own father than the “real” Jesuit. This substitute, who uses the term “‘IRS wiggler’” which “definitely should have raised a red flag in terms of the substitute’s experience and background,” given that Fogle has “never once heard the term anywhere outside of the Examination Center at which I’m posted” (231), is the one to make Fogle feel “that I suddenly, for the first time, understood the meaning of my father’s term ‘no-nonsense,’ and why it was a term of approval” (219). This substitute manifests the values his own father felt to be important, values Fogle has hitherto seen as at best abstract and at worst outdated, suffocating and conformist. Fogle describes his first impression of the substitute as being of a “Jesuit father in ‘mufti’” (226), ‘mufti’ being a word Fogle has previously introduced when talking about his father’s leisure attire (173). Fogle ends his description of the substitute’s speech with a comparison between his and his father’s hats (233) and makes the connection between them most explicit when calling the substitute “the Catholic father” (220). If we noted earlier that Fogle’s narrative seems to work on an unannounced – and claimed unconscious – logic of the importance of his father, this later reference to a Catholic father impels the reader to return to the earlier mention of Fogle’s father’s Catholic upbringing and invest that apparently irrelevant digression with greater significance: the repetition of “Catholic” and “father” serves to illustrate how for Fogle these words signify a kind of representative type, an embodiment of a particular moral outlook, while at the same time establishing his own father as an original example of that type.⁶⁹

If Wallace uses Fogle’s narrative as both a singular and a multiple father-son story, then

⁶⁹ Bellah quotes Orestes A. Brownson as an example of this type. Brownson, a “transcendentalist Unitarian who would later become America’s leading 19th-century Catholic thinker,” rejected “both utopian socialism and utopian individualism” in favour of “a balance in the tradition of American thought that went back to John Winthrop. ‘Community,’ he said, ‘without individuality is *tyranny*, the fruits of which are oppression, degradation and immobility, the synonym of death. Individuality without community is *individualism*, the fruits of which are dissolution, isolation, selfishness, disorder, anarchy, confusion, war ... What we need, then is ... communalism and individuality harmonized ... atoned.’” (118). Bearing this in mind, we might propose Brownson as another of Fogle’s fathers. If some readers might point out the different religious and moral traditions in the Protestant and Catholic branches of Christianity, Bellah notes that far from dissenting from the Protestant-dominated conceptualizations of the covenant, “Catholic expressions of the special mission of America ... would often outdo their Protestant models” (97). Even were this not the case, however, I would want to argue that Wallace was not as familiar with the intricacies of denominational differences as he could have been, and that his primary interest when using religious imagery or language was more in its utilization of abstract concepts like sacrifice, commitment, faith, and so on. As he himself admitted in the Spring 1996 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* he edited, “religion is incredibly fascinating as a general abstract object of thought – it might be the most interesting thing there is. But when it gets to the point of trying to communicate specific or persuasive stuff about religion, I find I always get frustrated and bored” (1996, 7).

this generational aspect feeds into the “Big Q” (543) of the novel Wallace mentions in the “Notes and Asides” section included at the end of *The Pale King*. Wallace pits “Old School IRS-as-Civics believers” against a newer “corporate philosophy: maximize revenue while minimizing costs” (543). This makes its way into the novel itself, too, phrased like this:

the struggle here was between traditional or ‘conservative’ officials who saw tax and its administration as an arena of social justice and civic virtue, on the one hand, and those more progressive, ‘pragmatic’ policymakers who prized the market model, efficiency, and a maximum return on the investment of the Service’s annual budget (82-3).

The big question, then, is “whether [the] IRS is to be essentially a corporate entity or a *moral* one” (543), and Fogle seems to view his father’s death as in a way associated with this question. Fogle introduces his narration of it with a description of Illinois’ institution of a progressive rather than proportional state sales tax. The ensuing chaos – “everyone buying under \$5.00 worth of groceries and running out to their car and putting the little bag in the car and running back in and buying another amount under \$5.00 and running out to their car” – as shoppers made “numerous separate small purchases of \$4.99 or less in order to take advantage of the much more attractive 3.75 percent sales tax on purchases under \$5.00” (195) is for Fogle “my first experience of seeing how the implementation of tax policy can actually affect people’s lives” (194). It affects his life in particular, when his father dies on a Christmas shopping trip at the height of this ill-fated experiment’s chaos. Let us spend a moment tracing this.

Fogle makes a point of establishing from the start that this policy

was a major tax-policy boner, which actually could have been easily prevented if anyone in the State Treasurer’s Office had bothered to consult with the [Internal Revenue] Service about the advisability of the scheme ... it’s an established fact that this never occurred. Despite state revenue agencies’ reliance on federal tax returns and the Service’s computer system’s master files in the enforcement of state tax law, there is a tradition of autonomy and distrust among state revenue offices for federal agencies like the IRS (194-5)

If for Fogle the political legislature’s failure to consult the IRS is the real error, it is one

founded in its marginalization of the Service's expertise. Furthermore, if the aim of the ill-advised policy was "to raise state tax revenues" (194), we might suggest that these two in combination – the sidelining of the IRS, the desire to raise revenues – mark a very nascent version of the thinking that would dominate the Service toward the end of the decade and into the 1980s, which Fogle later describes as a period when "new government priorities trickled down through the Treasury ... with an institutional emphasis on maximizing revenue" (247). At the close of his summary of the tax policy, Fogle says: "Anyhow, it was also at this time that my father was killed unexpectedly" (197). Although this correlation does not imply causation as such, Fogle's associative method of narration – particularly, as we have seen, in relation to his father – works here to suggest that not only tax policy itself but the ideologies that inform it had an "actual affect" on his life and his father's. Indeed I would argue that Fogle, while still not attributing direct cause, comes quite close to saying that such a misconceived tax policy played a particularly significant role in his father's death. Firstly, Fogle notes a connection between the policy and the process of Christmas shopping during its implementation:

The whole thing was repealed after less than four months. Actually, the state legislators came back to Springfield from their Christmas recess in order to convene and repeal it, as that period had been the most disastrous for retail commerce – holiday-season shopping in 1977 was a nightmare that people still sometimes chat ruefully about (196-7)

After then inserting the seeming-aside about his father's unexpected death, Fogle makes an explicit link between it and this "disastrous" period, saying that his father died "during the almost indescribably horrible and chaotic holiday shopping rush of December 1977, and the accident actually occurred while he was in the process of weekend Christmas shopping, which probably helped contribute to making the whole thing even more tragic" (197). This, I think, is a reasonably strong connection between errors in tax policy and his father's death. These errors would not have come about, and, the implication is, his father's death might have been avoided, had those policies been developed with an emphasis on the type of civic service the IRS – and the substitute father and his real father – represent. That Fogle is thinking in this way seems to be confirmed by the way he describes the litigation which follows his father's death. When Fogle recalls that the case was considered "a civil and not a criminal matter" (202), he seems to be characterizing it using the same sorts of distinctions between political-financial and moral-civil imperatives he used when

describing the Illinois tax policy. This impression is further cemented when he complains about his family's lawyers, for whom "the entire process was about numbers and money rather than anything like justice, responsibility, and the prevention of further wrongful, public, and totally undignified and pointless deaths" (205). Both of these are further echoes of Wallace's Big Q.

2b. The Substitute

His father's death also marks the point at which Fogle's gradual dismissal of his hip lifestyle becomes more distinctly focused on tax and accountancy, and we can see in his reading of the tax errors of the Illinois experiment the early moves in his rejection of the prevailing economic theories of the 1970s and '80s which is confirmed in his obverse conversion. We can understand this further by returning to our suggestion that the substitute teacher is a father figure for Fogle. In his exhortation, the substitute dwells on the question of the temporality proper to heroism. "Enduring tedium over real time in a confined space is what real courage is," he says; "[s]uch endurance is, as it happens, the distillate of what ... heroism [is]" (229). Sticking at something for an extended period of time, then, rather than a momentary commitment, is the basis of heroism. If we understand the substitute to be in some respects a ventriloquist for Fogle's late father, then the admonishment we quoted earlier concerning the false theatricality of television's "moment of choice" seems also to be a warning from Fogle's father not only to refrain from placing importance in mass media images of heroism but also to remain skeptical about taking events like his own conversion out of context. This has a temporal-political subtext, with the substitute outlining a view of politics free of showbusiness: committed service "entertains no one" (229) and is "minutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care." That the substitute alludes to this subtext in terms of childhood and adulthood, contrasting the quick gratifications of childhood entertainments with the "truths" of "latter adolescents who aspire to manhood" (229), reminds us of Wallace's comments to Larry McCaffery on the subject of rock and roll. Responding to a question about the influence of music on his generation of writers, Wallace elaborated on the relationship between the sixties and the so-called generation gap:

The phenomenon of rock [music] interests me ... because its birth was part of the rise of mass popular media, which completely changed the ways the U.S. was unified and split. The mass media unified the country geographically for pretty much the

first time. Rock helped change the fundamental splits in the U.S. from geographical splits to generational ones. Very few people I talk to understand what “generation gap’s” implications really were. Kids loved rock partly because their parents didn’t, and obversely. In a mass-mediated nation, it’s no longer North vs. South. It’s under-thirty vs. over-thirty. I don’t think you can understand the sixties and Vietnam and love-ins and LSD and the whole era of patricidal rebellion that helped inspire early postmodern fiction’s whole “We’re-going-to-trash-your-BeaverCleaver-plasticized-GOP-image-of-life-in-America” attitude without understanding rock ‘n’ roll. Because rock was and is all about busting loose, exceeding limits, and limits are usually set by parents, ancestors, older authorities. (McCaffery, 46-7)

Wallace is not the first writer to note the preponderance of generational concerns in the 1960s, but the important thing to take from his remarks is his implication that rock and roll became popular and had the effects it did because it fulfilled a need for kids to rebel. Bearing in mind Thomas Frank’s work showing how in the 1960s the advertising industry and popular media began to base their understanding of consumerism on youth and age,⁷⁰ the moment Wallace identifies here is one in which America becoming “mass-mediated” is the impetus for the (partially artificially created) rebellion of young against old. In Wallace’s eyes, the counterculture’s various expressions – love-ins, LSD, postmodern literature – were manifestations of this sense of generational split. Yet to say that these splits were in some way artificially engineered – or at least enhanced – is not to say they didn’t have real effects. The discussion of the waning of civics in §19 of *The Pale King* makes this clear. Unlike the more oblique references to particular historical periods in the substitute’s speech (he prefers to talk in terms of individual maturation), the civics section attempts to tie sociological changes to particular historical periods, with the sixties attracting attention for its fostering of problematic and undesirable developments in American culture. Set sometime in early 1980 (the conversation features speculations about the Republican ticket in that year’s Presidential election), at points the voices, which are often undifferentiated from each other, are identifiable as specific characters. One is DeWitt Glendenning, one of Fogle’s father figures, who addresses someone who is twenty-eight in 1980 – in other words, someone born in 1952 and part of Fogle’s generation. Glendenning assumes that in the younger man’s childhood there wasn’t a civics class at school (131) and from that assumption the section moves on to discuss the sixties as

⁷⁰ See the chapter “Think Young: Youth Culture and Creativity” (104-130) in Thomas Frank’s *The Conquest of Cool* for a succinct exploration of this development.

inaugurating particular generational narratives about what it means to be a citizen, using the same pie metaphor the substitute uses.⁷¹ The “fulcrum” for this change in America’s understanding of citizenship was, according to one speaker, “the moment in the sixties when rebellion against conformity became fashionable, a pose, a way to look cool to the others in your generation you wanted to impress and get accepted by” (144-5). The true meaning of citizenship, in which individuals consider themselves “parts of something larger to which we have profound responsibilities” (130), is distorted when political conviction merges with a concern with image and the language of the market (“fashionable, a pose, a way to look cool”). This prefigures the substitute’s position on heroism. In the civics discussion, politics becomes both equated with performance in the manner of Lasch’s theatrical politics and conceived of as a dissolution of political conviction (and the implied collective interest present in it) into individual posturing. The impetus behind this change – behind the desire to be fashionable and look cool – is the shift from geographic to generational difference Wallace identified in the interview with McCaffery. The implication is that the desire to look cool – i.e.: young – is a desire to differentiate oneself from older ‘squares’ and leads to the adoption of a pose of political activism devoid of any conviction, a pose in some ways forced on them by their – and the media’s – association of the older squares with po-faced fidelity to ideas of responsibility, sacrifice and commitment. The inception of a generational explanation for social differences and identities is ultimately seen as corrosive to a proper sense of citizenship.

The substitute teacher (and father) rejects such generational thinking. Warning his students of the “dread and doubt” (227) they will feel on returning to their homes for the Christmas vacation before their final bout of accountancy study, and reassuring them that this is the “natural” “hesitation” (228) before embracing the “heroism” of the profession, he acknowledges that “you will read the approval in your parents’ smiles as an approval of your surrender” (227). That the students might see it this way – as a surrender to an authority they dispute and resent – the substitute suggests is the result of emphasizing generational markers of identity rather than valuing traits such as commitment, sacrifice, and service. The substitute refuses to give credence to generational splits: he understands

⁷¹ In §19, one voice understands the problem as being that we now “think of ourselves as eaters of the pie instead of makers of the pie” (136), a country in which rights come without responsibilities (130). The substitute notes that “the pie has been made – the contest is now in the slicing” (232), continuing to address his class: “Gentlemen, you aspire to hold the knife. Wield it. To admeasure. To shape each given slice, the knife’s angle and depth of cut ... It is you ... [w]ho ride, man the walls, define the pie, serve” (232-3). If the voices in the civics section mourn the loss of a sense of control over America’s riches, the substitute finds a heroic cause in marshalling – and to a certain extent controlling – the distribution of those riches.

the “the death of childhood’s limitless possibility” (228) not as surrender but as a welcome confrontation with the requirements of adulthood. Part of the reason for this rejection of generational thinking is that it misrepresents the temporality proper to heroism. If American culture is split into the over and under thirties as Wallace suggests, a heroism based on the “year upon year” existence of “you and the job, at your desk” becomes impossible. The substitute’s heroism privileges continuation from youth to age – and, we can assume, from generation to generation – whereas the generational split insists on radical differences between the concerns of youth and age. If the substitute ventriloquizes Fogle’s father, the exhortation is a good example of Wallace’s interweaving of personal, familial narratives and broader national ones because the substitute’s address becomes one in which an understanding of time based on continuation and extension unites the (potential for) personal reconciliation between father and son and a concept of commitment and politics. Fogle himself admits that “my entering a career in the IRS might appear connected to my father’s accident – in more humanistic terms, connected to my ‘loss’ of a father who was himself an accountant” (175).

2c. Reconciliation

The move towards reconciliation involves a greater engagement, on Fogle’s part, with citizenship, something Wallace enquires into throughout *The Pale King*, focusing, in a similar way to Bellah, on how “the rights and duties of US citizens” (131) are balanced.⁷² One of the developments the speakers in §19 bemoan is the separation of these two imperatives. If some of them attribute this to specific developments in the 1960s – the rise of “corporations and advertising” (136), or how Vietnam meant that “a whole generation ... for the first time questioned authority and said that their individual moral beliefs about the war outweighed their duty to go fight if their duly elected representatives told them too” (132) – another, possibly Glendenning, thinks it’s “gone farther than that”

⁷² This continues Wallace’s interest in debates about negative and positive freedom seen in the Marathe-Steeply discussion in *Infinite Jest* which, according to Adam Kelly, “play[s] out the terms of Isaiah Berlin’s famous 1958 lecture “Two Concepts of Liberty.” In this lecture, Berlin distinguishes between negative liberty, which refers to the absence of external constraints on the individual agent, and positive liberty, where the agent possesses internal control and self-mastery in pursuit of his/her goals” (2012a, 274). The Marathe-Steeply debate reprises one which has taken place throughout American history. As Bellah notes, “[i]n the 17th and 18th centuries ... freedom was part of a whole articulated framework of moral and religious values – it meant freedom to do the good and was almost equivalent to virtue. Under the rising criticism of utilitarianism, first in the late 18th century and then with ever greater insistence in the 19th and 20th centuries, freedom came to mean freedom to pursue self-interest, latterly defined as “freedom to do your own thing.”” (xix). In terms of the covenant with which Bellah is concerned, “[n]egative freedom only defends the individual against incursions, whereas positive freedom actually creates the conditions for the full participation of all” (152).

although he is “damned if [he] can quite figure it out” (135). The closest he gets is invoking Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation about American democracy, which he paraphrases as

one thing about democracies and their individualism is that they by their very nature corrode the citizen’s sense of true community, of having real true fellow citizens whose interests and concerns were the same as his. This is a kind of ghastly irony, if you think about it, since a form of government engineered to produce equality makes its citizens so individualistic and self-absorbed they end up as solipsists (141)

If we agree with Marshall Boswell’s assessment that “Wallace shared” (473) many of Glendenning’s observations, we might suggest that the concept of citizenship privileged in *The Pale King* – and in and by Fogle’s narrative in particular – revolves around two related kinds of reconciliation: that in which the individual’s desire for particular rights is balanced with the requirement that they take on certain responsibilities designed to protect and extend those rights to others; and that in which the individual’s rights and responsibilities are accommodated to those of every other individual in the community. These kinds of reconciliation, as Boswell notes, are what Wallace outlines as the second of “2 Broad arcs” that dominate *The Pale King*: “Being individual vs. being part of larger things” (545). For Wallace, the individual has to reconcile two impetuses within him or herself, and that individual as a whole has to be reconciled with the larger community.

I want to suggest that this concern with reconciliation informs the type of temporality Fogle’s narrative endorses, which seems to me to involve an attempt to reconcile a tension between continuation and tradition on one side and the possibility of change on the other. Fogle gains inspiration from the parts of the substitute’s speech that deal with “real time” (229). For the substitute, this time consists of “year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care” which as we have said privileges continuation and the distinct lack of change, of which the substitute is suspicious because he associates it with “childhood entertainments.” Yet the moment in which such inspiration is felt is for Fogle the moment he comes to believe is the moment of his conversion, which is precisely the kind of change or “grand gesture” the substitute dismisses because of its misunderstanding of real time. Similarly, Fogle’s adoption of ideals of civic service occurs at the historical moment when the IRS is undergoing an ideological shift from those ideals to ones of neoliberal economics. Fogle appears to continue the “IRS-as-civics” (543)

tradition in the face of this change, yet he has arrived at this tradition through a profound and deep change from nihilist wastoid to committed citizen.

For Wallace, using this tension involves rejecting the apparent differences between tradition and change that have been marshalled in the service of generational narratives, differences which have been associated – over-simply in Wallace’s view – with political terms like ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive.’⁷³ This rejection is part of the logic behind the evocation of pop culture at the beginning of Fogle’s narrative. In *The Conquest of Cool* Thomas Frank describes the historical understanding that underlies the “curious aesthetic known as “retro,”” noting that

[r]etro’s vision of the past as a floating style catalog from which we can choose quaint wardrobes but from which we are otherwise disconnected is, in many respects,

⁷³ Throughout the novel, Wallace is alert to the ways in which terms like ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’ hold a variety of simultaneous meanings. At one point he notes that “[t]here are all kinds of conservatives depending on what it is they want to conserve” (132) and in his discussion of ““conservative’ officials who saw tax and its administration as an arena of social justice and civic virtue” and “those more progressive, ‘pragmatic’ policymakers who prized the market model,” Wallace signals his awareness of the slipperiness of such terms by amending to the word ‘conservative’ a footnote remarking that it means “somewhat confusingly, classically liberal” (82). Such awareness is useful here in reminding us that Fogle’s conversion takes place in a complex political environment in which the word ‘liberal,’ for instance, can simultaneously connote classical liberalism, social liberalism, and even the kind of neo-classical liberalism advocated by Cheney and Reagan as well as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek. With this in mind, Fogle’s embrace of values associated with his father should not be taken as simply a regressive or reactionary move. Indeed, Wallace complained about such moves in a 2003 interview with Dave Eggers in *The Believer*, which is worth quoting at length as it speaks to much of the concerns of *The Pale King*, which Wallace was working on at the time: “As of 2003, the rhetoric of the enterprise is fucked. 95 percent of political commentary, whether spoken or written, is now polluted by the very politics it’s supposed to be about. Meaning it’s become totally ideological and reductive: The writer/speaker has certain political convictions or affiliations, and proceeds to filter all reality and spin all assertion according to those convictions and loyalties. Everybody’s pissed off and exasperated and impervious to argument from any other side. Opposing viewpoints are not just incorrect but contemptible, corrupt, evil. Conservative thinkers are balder about this kind of attitude: Limbaugh, Hannity, that horrific O’Reilly person. Coulter, Kristol, etc. But the Left’s been infected, too. Have you read this new Al Franken book? Parts of it are funny, but it’s totally venomous (like, what possible response can rightist pundits have to Franken’s broadsides but further rage and return-venom?). Or see also e.g. Lapham’s latest *Harper’s* columns, or most of the stuff in the *Nation*, or even *Rolling Stone*. It’s all become like Zinn and Chomsky but without the immense bodies of hard data these older guys use to back up their screeds. There’s no more complex, messy, community-wide argument (or “dialogue”); political discourse is now a formulaic matter of preaching to one’s own choir and demonizing the opposition. Everything’s relentlessly black-and-whitened. Since the truth is way, way more gray and complicated than any one ideology can capture, the whole thing seems to me not just stupid but stupefying. Watching O’Reilly v. Franken is watching bloodsport. How can any of this possibly help me, the average citizen, deliberate about whom to choose to decide my country’s macroeconomic policy, or how even to conceive for myself what that policy’s outlines should be, or how to minimize the chances of North Korea nuking the DMZ and pulling us into a ghastly foreign war, or how to balance domestic security concerns with civil liberties? Questions like these are all massively complicated, and much of the complication is not sexy, and well over 90 percent of political commentary now simply abets the uncomplicatedly sexy delusion that one side is Right and Just and the other Wrong and Dangerous. Which is of course a pleasant delusion, in a way—as is the belief that every last person you’re in conflict with is an asshole—but it’s childish, and totally uncondusive to hard thought, give and take, compromise, or the ability of grown-ups to function as any kind of community” (Eggers).

hip consumerism's proudest achievement: it simultaneously reinforces contemporary capitalism's curious ahistorical vision and its feverish cycling of obsolescence.
(227)⁷⁴

If this echoes Fredric Jameson's observation about postmodern culture's "omnipresent and indiscriminate appetite for ... the styles and fashions of a dead past" (1991b, 286) reading the opening of Fogle's narrative through Frank's observation suggests that Fogle was to a certain extent compelled to use such pop cultural signifiers. According to Frank, contemporary capitalism considers such signifiers the entirety of the past. In searching for the appropriate period signifiers, then, Fogle finds only one option because he is disconnected from the rest. Confirmation of this predicament can be found by comparing those things Fogle claims to remember clearly and those he doesn't: "the things I can remember now seem mostly pointless. I mean really remember, not just have a general impression of" (157). These pointless things include hair styles (157), popular music (161), advertising (164 – Fogle remembers the Uncola adverts, to which Frank devotes a whole chapter), drugs (158), TV shows (158), junk food (158) and sometimes a number of these combined: "Smoking pot after school in high school and then watching TV and eating Tang out of the jar" (158). The political events of the time can only be viewed through the mediation of these clearer memories – "There was also the period when my mother was so upset when Richard Nixon got reelected so easily, which I remember because it was around then that I tried Ritalin" (158) – or hazily askance: "I remember Jimmy Carter addressing the nation in a cardigan, and something about Carter's brother turning out to be a wastoid" (164).

There is an irony to Fogle's evocation of the "pointless" ephemera of the 1970s. His story is narrated from 1984, not all that long after the era he fails to adequately remember. Such haziness has the effect of making the seventies seem much more distant than they really are (which is possibly also an effect of the novel's 'real' present being 2005), and also testifies to the power of such thought given its persistence in Fogle after his apparent conversion. Yet following his conversion, Fogle is nonetheless able to analyze this state of affairs. He notes that the psychedelic clothes and buckskin jacket he wore were "commercial" and "obligatory" and the "standard getup" worn by "all" (157). Though he

⁷⁴ That Wallace was particularly aware of ahistorical tendencies, especially later on in his career, is noted by Adam Kelly, who writes that although Wallace "would never leave behind the core linguistic and philosophical questions" early influences like Wittgenstein and Derrida posed, "neither would he fully embrace the ahistorical facets of their thought" (2012a, 274).

notes that “[e]veryone I knew and hung out with was a wastoid, and we knew it. It was hip to be ashamed of it” (164), there was no concurrent awareness that such regulated behaviour was regulated by anyone other than themselves. It is this greater perspective – a greater historical perspective, we might say – that Fogle gains. Before his conversion, this type of integration of personal behaviour with forces outside the self was limited to very brief, Obetrol-like moments, such as when his father comes home early to find him and his teenage friends smoking pot, drinking and messing up his living room and Fogle briefly sees himself as his father does (171). This is rare in pre-conversion Fogle; the ability to situate himself outside a loop that recycles all awareness back toward itself is of a certain conceptual continuum with an understanding of self that recognizes a relation between the individual and the collective, between oneself and “something larger” (130) than oneself. Prior to his conversion, for all his awareness of the generation gap, Fogle lacked even a cursory awareness of his generation in relation to other social groups. Put another way, if Fogle understood that there was a generation gap, he didn’t truly understand what that gap was between, and what it signified. In momentarily seeing himself through his father’s eyes, he entertains the possibility that there are points beyond those of his peers from which to consider his and his peers’ behaviour.

Even from so comparatively recent a vantage point, Fogle’s memory of the seventies remains clouded by the logic of retro. What’s more, it is a fashion that aims to do what Fogle arguably does in his conversion: make the past new. But retro doesn’t connect this novelty with change in the same way. On the contrary, at the root of fashion’s raiding of the past in search of novelty is its need to keep things the same. This “feverish cycling” of novelty, as Frank puts it, is aimed at maintaining a status quo in which consumers can expect and rely on endless novelty. This might be claimed as a reconciliation of sorts between continuation and change, but it is so only insofar as it institutionalizes both tradition and novelty, making the latter a “style catalog” governed by what Jean-François Lyotard calls “the rule of the new” to which “all markets” are “subject” (1991, 106) and dispensing with a sense of the former as “the temporal continuum through which the experience of generations used to be transmitted” (1991, 105).

Fogle’s narrative reassesses these relations between tradition and change. Conversion is the ideal form for such a task because it requires the presence of both to be counted as conversion at all. If Fogle is certain that something has changed in him, then that change requires time in which to occur. Not just the moment of the conversion itself – which as

we've explored is hard to pinpoint – but also an extended period in which its importance can be registered and understood. After all, this change is a change from a particular state – from a particular set of ideals and morals – to another, and as such implies a prolongation. Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century American theologian, noted this too, as Bellah reminds us. Edwards outlined a range of criteria with which to identify “the genuineness of the conversion experience” (Bellah, 20); one of “the most important” was evidence of “a genuine and *permanent* transformation in the nature of the convert, that is of his whole personality in relation to his environment” (Bellah, 20, my emphasis). The precise length of the prolongation is to a certain extent irrelevant, at least for our purposes here, but what is important is that the change be registered as different from the ceaseless instantaneous passing of “what happens” as Lyotard puts it (1991, 106), and for that to occur, the change needs to be recognized as in some way profound. Fogle’s uncertainties may even come from this requirement – the distance of five years may just not be long enough to determine whether his conversion was or was not as he perceives it – although, as Peter Brooks implies when he talks of narrative as “a structuring operation elicited by, and made necessary by, those meanings that develop through succession and time” (12), the more time that elapses the more narrative will be required.

Conversion is also always in some sense a renunciation of the past, or, more specifically, *a* past, that of the individual convert. This specificity is important: we should not mistake this renunciation of an individual past with a renunciation of the past as a category in itself, as Fogle would not feel the certainty of his change were it not for his belief in such a category. Nevertheless, conversion calls that past an error, even a waste, and commits ‘from now on’ to following a new path. As such, it attempts to create a new time, situating the conversion at year zero. This is paradoxical because conversion structurally requires the use of that past which is erased. That is to say that one cannot convert, institute a new time and then dismiss the past prior to the conversion; one needs to keep that past in place permanently in order for the conversion to remain persuasive. Indeed, the convert’s claims of a new time have an irreducibly artificial feel – the un-converted feel no such sense of a new time. For the convert, though, such an assertion is part of the act of converting itself, a useful fiction. In this way we might consider conversions themselves and the conversion narrative as a form spaces in which variations of or divergences from recorded history can be entertained and tested out, and in which alternative possibilities can be asserted and explored. In *The Pale King*, this sense is strengthened by the fact that Fogle’s conversion is figured so overtly as, recalling Marshall Boswell’s term, the obverse of those who came to

dominate the American political landscape from the 1970s onwards. The clarity of such an impression comes from Wallace's attention to historical accuracy. If Boswell notes how he "zeroes in specifically and relentlessly on the Reagan tax cuts of 1981, and the subsequent ascendancy in American political discourse of so-called 'supply side economics,' as a pivotal and damning moment in post-war American civics history" (465), Wallace is equally alert to history when setting Fogle's conversion in Christopher Lasch's culture of narcissism. If characters like Wolf in Jennifer Egan's *The Invisible Circus* – veterans of the sixties movements – lament the loss of collectivity seen in the 1970s, they phrase it in terms strikingly similar to those the civics believers in *The Pale King* use when bemoaning the disappearance of older values and the individuals – in this case the Founding Fathers – they see as embodying them, "[m]en with at least as much concern for the common good as for personal advantage" (134). One of these speakers puts it like this:

But it seems like citizens ... did feel like they were part of Everything, that the huge Everybody Else that determined policy and taste and the common good was in fact made up of a whole lot of individuals just like them, that they were in fact *part of* Everything, and that they had to hold up their end and pull their weight and assume what they did made some difference the same way Everybody Else did, if the country was going to stay a nice place to live. (139)

Rather than "retreat[ing] to purely personal preoccupations" like many Americans "[a]fter the political turmoil of the sixties" as Lasch bemoaned (4), Fogle feels himself to be "waking up" and purposefully moves *out* into the world. As he does so, he rejects those elements of society Lasch viewed as contributing to the therapeutic atmosphere: he rejects the "mindless eclecticism" (Lasch, 153) of university education, frustrated by the "diffuse, shapeless, and permissive institution" that preaches "cultural revolution, personal fulfillment, and creative alienation" (Lasch, 151), complaining about "[c]lasses where everything was fuzzy and abstract and open to interpretation and then those interpretations were open to still more interpretations" (Wallace 2011, 155). Instead he finds solace in a profession which does in fact instil in its workers what Lasch describes as a "capacity for silence and self-containment" (152). Fogle develops the "self-restraint and self-discipline ... American society no longer values," rejecting the "character traits demanded by a corrupt, permissive, hedonistic culture" (Lasch, 178). Perhaps most clearly, Fogle becomes a company man, which as Eugene Emerson Jennings noted in *Routes to the Executive Suite*, was by the 1970s "an obvious anachronism" (quoted by Lasch, 61). Rather

than “us[ing] the company for his own ends” (Lasch, 45) and fearing the career-threatening “overidentification” which a manager in *Routes to the Executive Suite* associates with loyalty and commitment (quoted by Lasch, 45), Fogle identifies strongly with the “Service’s core” (Wallace 2011, 176). That his company is also a government agency makes his obverse conversion even clearer. As Schulman notes, in the seventies “Americans developed a deeper, more thorough suspicion of the instruments of public life and a more profound disillusionment with the corruption and inefficiency of public institutions ... the conception of a national community with duties and obligations to one’s fellow citizens, elicited greater skepticism” (xv). Not from Chris Fogle, who embraces this sense of national community in the field of government activity in which this skepticism was most pronounced: taxation. Schulman provides an account of the tax revolts of the mid-to-late 1970s, and notes how propositions restricting states’ abilities to raise taxes were passed in California, Tennessee, “Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Washington” between 1978 and 1981 (212). Fogle, then, embraces taxation as the price of citizenship at the historical moment most Americans found that price too steep.

If Fogle’s story takes place in a recognizable seventies context, his ability to move so conclusively against its prevailing trends signals not (just) Wallace’s movement into the more fabulous register seen in his description of Claude Sylvanshine as a “fact psychic” (118), in Shane Drinion’s levitation in §46, or in the appearance of ghosts of long-dead former employees to concentrating IRS examiners,⁷⁵ but also Wallace’s attempt to rethink the given and accepted narratives of post-war American history.⁷⁶ Nonetheless those supernatural elements are important here. While they appear to destabilize Wallace’s depiction of a recognizable reality, I want to argue that in fact Wallace’s careful interweaving of them with the quotidian realities of IRS work (as seen in §25: “‘Irrelevant’ Chris Fogle turns a page. Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page” [310]) and his attention to details of place (seen most clearly in the opening description of the midwestern prairie: “Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs

⁷⁵ Lawrence Zelenak, a self-described “academic tax lawyer (and a former temporary employee of the Internal Revenue Service)” (971), in his review of *The Pale King* for the *Michigan Law Review*, suggests that there are “three types of factual assertions – accurate, fabricated, and mixed” (980) in the novel, by which he means that truthful assertions about the IRS’s history are made, others are entirely made-up, and some blend the two. While I agree with Zelenak that it is often difficult to tell what is truthful and what is fabricated, I would disagree that the third type – a mixture – really constitutes a third type on the same level as the first two. Rather it seems to me that the third type is the cumulative effect, over the novel as a whole, of this blurring of truth and fabrication.

⁷⁶ Stephen J. Burn has called this Wallace’s attempt to present us with a “counterfactual past” (2012, 374).

and skylines of canted rust..." [3]) allows him to open up small possibilities where a different historical narrative (or narratives) might be possible, much like Fogle's experiences on Obetrol allowed him to sense, however briefly, other possibilities in life.

This opening up of possibility, however slight, becomes central to the political import of Fogle's conversion. In §19's discussion of civics, one voice (possibly Glendenning) remarks that pre-sixties America "was a utopia," one "which for two hundred years actually *worked*" (133). For this speaker, this "fact" is not only "priceless – it's literally a miracle" (133). Yet Wallace figures this not simply as the conservative vision of the sixties as aberration we encountered when we considered Lydia Galton's views in *Trance* (although Glendenning admits he "voted for [Gerald] Ford and I'll likely vote for Bush or maybe Reagan and I'll feel solid about my vote" [134]), but rather uses it to assert the real possibility of utopia. Furthermore, that this really existing utopia did so until the "apex [of] the sixties" and that decade's dismissal of civics suggests that Fogle is the next heir to the "profound moral enlightenment[,] their sense of civics" people like Glendenning, the substitute, and Fogle's father saw in the Founding Fathers' "incredible moral and imaginative achievement" of the Constitution and the *Federalist Papers* (133). If our analysis so far has implicitly agreed with Boswell in his observation of the "clear and surely intentional echoes in vocabulary, imagery and theme that link the two sections" (473) – 19 (the civics debate) and 22 (Fogle's narrative) – this mention of the *Federalist Papers* alerts us to another. In fact they play a crucial role in Fogle's conversion, seen when he considers why he walked into the wrong classroom and heard the substitute's speech. He suggests that he "was so intent on thinking about the review and the final exam [for his intended class, American Political Thought] that what happened is that I took the wrong building entrance without noticing it" (189). That review was to be on the *Federalist Papers*. He also wonders whether the "secondary meaning" (223) of *As The World Turns* "almost terrifying pun about the passive waste of time sitting there watching something ... while all the while real things in the world were going on and people with direction and initiative were taking care of business in a brisk, no-nonsense way" (222) hitting him that morning contributed to this preoccupation. During the substitute's speech, Fogle realizes what his father meant by the phrase 'no-nonsense.' It seems clear, though, that Fogle has been primed for this minor revelation by the experience earlier that morning when the real meaning of the "terrifying pun" made itself clear. If 'no-nonsense' is one of the terms that can be associated with the ideals of Fogle's father figures, and is one his father used, then both focuses of his preoccupation – the *Federalist Papers* and the positive aspects of the

term ‘no-nonsense’ – can be linked to these figures, given that it is likely Glendenning that speaks of his admiration for the *Federalist Papers* in the civics debate. These figures, as we have established, represent for Fogle a particular set of ideals he comes himself to identify with; thus we might suggest that he ends up in the substitute’s classroom because he is so immersed in thinking about the ideals of his father figures that he unconsciously walks into a classroom in which those ideals are spoken of as heroic – another instance of being “open” (albeit unaware of it) to the possibility of conversion. Fogle himself suggestively includes “the authors of the *Federalist Papers*” in a list of people – “St Paul, or Martin Luther ... or even President Reagan” – who experienced some sort of conversion (191).

If the novel here associates civics with the creation of utopias, it also suggests that such utopias are created with a complex temporal dynamic in which change is contextualized within a broader temporal frame. According to Glendenning, America was a utopia which lasted for two hundred years: it embodied the continuation and extension the substitute speaks so highly of. That it ended, though, does not in Glendenning’s eyes discredit it; instead it is the divergence of America from this utopia’s founding ideals that led to its extinction. If these ideals remain intact, then, even without their manifestation in national form, any future creation of another American utopia will also necessarily be a re-creation or re-construction of that past utopia in the present of that construction. If Bellah understands individual conversion as a re-making – he writes that “[t]he idea of reform ... is related to the idea of conversion ... Reformation is a kind of renovation or renewal, making new ... The primary reference of the concept of the reformation or renewal is the soul of the individual” (9-10) – Glendenning understands American renewal in terms of the same temporal dynamic as that which characterizes individual conversion. In this context, it is no surprise that despite the forward movement implied by utopian propositions, Fogle’s immediate experience of his conversion is that it has come “too late” (237); after the substitute’s speech, he feels “suddenly and totally behind” (234). Fogle’s conversion comes too late for two reasons. Firstly, his ideas about the IRS’s role are out of date. Fogle discovers and embraces the ideals he does at the moment the IRS becomes embroiled in an internecine battle between such “True Believers” (271) as himself and the neoliberal “corporate” (543) philosophy that Reagan’s presidency heralded. Secondly his conversion to those ideals comes too late for his father to see the change in his priorities and offer him

the chance for approval and reconciliation.⁷⁷ Of course from one perspective, such lateness can appear simply regressive, with Fogle rather comically adopting the ideals, priorities, manner, clothes and occupation of an earlier generation who resemble the “inner-directed” (13) of David Reisman’s *The Lonely Crowd*.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, utopianism’s focus on the future and the progressive change implied by the notion of conversion serve to temper this impression of regression to the effect that Fogle appears late and early, old and new. This signals another apparent destabilization in the novel in which Wallace’s focus on American history appears to be threatened by the introduction of supernatural elements. Fogle’s zeal – and this sense of being both early and late – attracts the attention of his superiors, who, as Wallace remarks in the “Notes and Asides” section, suspect that Fogle might be in possession of a “formula of numbers that permits total concentration” (541), though “he can’t remember” them because “he wasn’t paying attention when he happened to read the series of documents that added up to the string of numbers that, when held in serial in his head, allows him to maintain interest and concentration at will” (541). These potential talents, Wallace goes on, have alerted the group of IRS employees who represent the “new guard” (546), whose “willingness to experiment/think in fresh new ways leads, paradoxically, to deep mysticism: a certain set of numbers that lets examiners concentrate better, etc. The ultimate point is the question whether humans or machines can do exams better” (546). The fantastical premise of this series of numbers, however, is, like with other fabulist elements, used to draw one’s attention to specific matters of American history. Here, Fogle becomes the central figure in a “tension” Sean McCann and Michael Szalay identify as “a central dynamic of the sixties,” one between “the productive resources implicit in the inalienable qualities of talent and trained ability, on the one hand, and those implicit in the control of complex organizations, on the other: between, in short, the interests of professionals and those of managers” (2005b, 453). By the 1980s, when this tension has formed itself into particular political ideologies and moral outlooks, Fogle’s professional dedication is no longer used in the service of the greater good but instead, as McCann and Szalay put it, “increasingly suited to the market, antagonistic to government,

⁷⁷ There is a sense, of course, in which conversion is always too late insofar as it involves a renunciation of a past life. The newly-converted lament their late entry into this improved life, which, conversely, they come to feel they were always destined for. They experience an urgent need to catch up, to make up for lost time. One of the residual ironies of conversion is that for it to occur at all, such ‘wasted’ previous experiences have to be lived first.

⁷⁸ As Michael Szalay has noted in *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party*, Reisman “recalls how once ‘leaders went into politics to do a job ... rather than to seek a responsive audience’” (2012a, 80). This suspicion of the audience is, as we have seen, shared by the substitute who makes a point of equating heroism with the lack of an audience. Lasch, in the 1991 afterword to *The Culture of Narcissism*, wrote that *The Lonely Crowd* was “one of the models for the kind of investigation I was trying to conduct” (238).

and indifferent to the public sphere” (2005b, 454). In *The Pale King*, Fogle’s very professional ability is seen by managers as serving a key rhetorical function in their campaign for further automation at IRS centres. While he might appear to be living proof that humans are better equipped to examine tax forms than computers, if his talent can be first observed and then shown to be lacking compared to machines, the neoliberal managers’ case will be strengthened. As Wallace explains, “[Merrill] Lehl ... has sent [Sylvanshine] to find and place the very finest GS-7 wigglers he can in a given group, so that when the A/NADA [computer] outperforms them on revenue, it’ll be convincing” (540). If, then, neoliberals represent one version of the complex temporal dynamic between old and new – in which their “willingness to experiment/think in fresh new ways leads, paradoxically” as Wallace makes sure to note, “to deep mysticism,” to what Bellah describes as “the utopianism of total technical control ... in the service of the “freedom” of individual self-interest” (xx)⁷⁹ – then Fogle’s possible possession of this string of numbers allows us to consider another version, in which the human “qualities of talent and trained ability” might be harnessed in the similarly paradoxical creation of a utopia informed by the past.

3. Is It Happening?

Understanding this larger political context to Fogle’s conversion helps us to conceptualize more clearly the tension between continuation or tradition and change that we identified in it. In his essay “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” published in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Jean-François Lyotard makes a distinction between the temporality of the new and that of the now which is also useful in this regard. For Lyotard, the new is part of a capitalistic process which causes the breakdown of a temporal continuum in which work loses its “theological depth” and becomes the “control and manipulation of information” (1991, 105). The opposition Lyotard sets up here between temporal depth – continuation, tradition – and the instantaneous flashing of superficial information resonates with Wallace’s portrayal of the work of monk-like IRS examiners “in long rows and columns ... all intently occupied and busy” (289-90) in a “totally silent” (290) room, who are threatened by “Lehl’s axiom ... that the definitive test of the efficiency of any

⁷⁹ Bellah notes this in the same paragraph as remarking that “[t]he complex of capitalism, utilitarianism, and science as a cultural form has its own world view, its own “religion” even – though it is an adamantly this-worldly one” (xx). For Bellah, “[t]he political expression of this complex is a technical-regulative conception of political society in which the state is seen as an essentially neutral arbiter among the contenting interest groups, whose competition and countervailing pressures are assumed to guarantee the interest of all” (xx-xxi).

organization structure was information and the filtering and dissemination of information” (12). For Lyotard, information has a politically significant temporality, because it

is by definition a short-lived element. As soon as it is transmitted and shared, it ceases to be information, it becomes an environmental given ... The length of time it occupies is, so to speak, instantaneous. Between two pieces of information, ‘nothing happens’ ... A confusion thereby becomes possible ... between what happens – the new – and the *Is it happening?*, the *now*. (1991, 105-6)

This phrase – “is it happening?” – is what I want to focus on here. For Lyotard it entertains the sublime possibility that “nothing further will happen” (1991, 107). This is important because it refutes the human arrogance, exemplified in capital, in which “the will affirms its hegemony over time” (1991, 107). Lyotard sees the “avant-gardist task” as “undoing th[is] presumption of the mind with respect to time” (1991, 107) by opening up possibilities for the now. Initially this might seem rather far from Fogle’s narrative, but in a sense the incommensurability between Fogle’s conviction that something happened and his inability to account for it is a question of the sublime, a version of what Lyotard describes as “a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented” (1991, 98). There are further parallels – as well as interesting divergences – between Fogle’s experience and Lyotard’s essay when we remember that Fogle’s narrative focuses – as per his stated understanding of its requirements – on his origins and journey to ‘where he is now.’ But curiously that latter location is hardly explored or explained: as we saw in the first half of this chapter, a certain amount of detective work has to be undertaken by the reader just to establish when that now is. Much of the novel has this feeling of set-up, with Wallace establishing the environment and basis for action before any characters engage in something we might actually call action. Although it is at first tempting to ascribe this to *The Pale King*’s unfinished state, Wallace’s notes to self suggest instead that this sense of deferred action is fully intended: “Plot a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens” (546); “something big *threatens* to happen but doesn’t actually happen” (544, Wallace’s emphasis). Wallace, like Lyotard, entertains the possibility that nothing further will happen, and this strategy of set-ups without occurrences animates not just Fogle’s narration as a whole – in the tension between his digressive, potentially boring style and the series of “dramatic” incidents that form it, which are self-consciously told by ramping up narrative

momentum, particularly in the parts where Fogle narrates his father's death⁸⁰ – but also at each stage of it as he moves through the contextualization for his conversion. The piling up of context and his digressive irrelevancies serve to forestall the moment he will actually have to describe the conversion itself. If Fogle ultimately directs Lyotard's question – "is it happening?" – at his conversion, we also note that he has been asking it throughout his narrative: in his consideration of how others – his father, his mother, the Founding Fathers, St Paul, Ronald Reagan, Martin Luther – changed their lives' direction, in his repeated disclaimers about reading too much significance into probably coincidental events, in his equally repeated assertions that "life-changing experiences are not translatable or explainable to anyone else" (214), and in admitting that "I am not a hundred percent sure this was real."

Yet while the emphasis of the question is for Lyotard this anticipation of nothing happening, for Fogle it is one of verification. Fogle would like to resolve this question one way or another, rather than preserve it as a question. If "is it happening?" can mean 'is the thing I thought would happen happening?' for Fogle it is more akin to asking 'is what I think is happening happening?' though really these are variations on this theme of verification, which also entails a certain kind of anticipation. The "it" in the original question is important here, because it suggests that the questioner has some preconception of that which is happening, even that such a preconception is required in order to be able to ask the question in the first place. In Fogle's case, it is in this "it" that his conviction that the conversion occurred finds its way into the very uncertainty he has about accounting for it. He asks 'is my conversion happening?' These attempts at verification – these questions – include a type of temporal understanding in which the past, present, and future come into complex relation and tend towards reconciliation. Firstly "is it happening?" is a question of the now: not only because it asks it of the thing happening *right now*, but as Lyotard notes, the very asking of the question secures the now because it harbours doubt about a future coming. But it is also a question of the future, insofar as it projects a possibility forward into it, either in the sublime shape of Lyotard's "nothing further" which is itself a negative of the future, or in the simpler sense that it aims to verify a preconceived notion, a past future: 'is the thing I thought would happen happening?' Being able to answer it involves saying either 'yes, the future (which is now) is what I thought it would be' or 'no, it is

⁸⁰ Although it is not my focus here, Wallace's general comments about the novel as a whole suggest this was to be a feature throughout *The Pale King*. One can certainly see elements of it in the eventlessness of §25 – the "turns a page" section – and the drama of Drinion's levitation.

entirely different.’ Finally, it is a question of the past, too, because that preconceived notion is something that was arrived at prior to the question – the “it” of “is it happening?” At the centre of this dynamic is the happening itself. In other words, the preconceived notion – the “it” – is arrived at as a result of a phenomenological sense of something happening, which prompts the question “is it happening?” as a kind of verification. This is in some ways similar to Lyotard’s conception of the question. He writes that “it happens ‘precedes’, so to speak, the question pertaining to what happens,” but then corrects himself, suggesting instead that “[t]he event happens as a question mark ‘before’ happening as a question” (1991, 90). Fogle differs from Lyotard here insofar as he experiences the event prior to the question in a much firmer way; his doubt only comes when he tries to account for it. Nevertheless, Fogle’s doubt is strong enough to force him back toward questioning the thing he was so certain of. But Lyotard writes that “*It happens* is rather ‘in the first place’ *is it happening, is this it, is it possible?* Only ‘then’ is any mark determined by the questioning: is this or that happening, is it this or something else, is it possible that this or that?” (1991, 90). In other words, ‘is *something* happening?’ precedes ‘is *this particular thing* happening?’ For Lyotard, then, the event happens *first* as a question and is then later determined. For Fogle, the event is first determined and then later doubted; his experience of the event itself is powerful, but when he comes to narrate it he comes to doubt it; narration becomes both a way of verifying the conversion and the instrument of his doubt about it. Whereas for Lyotard asking the question threatens to stop time, for Fogle asking the question is a way of securing the conversion through interrogation. For Fogle asking the question involves a certain reconciliation of the tension between continuation and change: the question itself privileges the concept of the event happening, yet he is only able to ask it if he accommodates it into the continuity of something like a conception of past, present, and future. In asking Lyotard’s question of his conversion, Fogle seeks confirmation of its occurrence *in time*. This temporal dynamic is well phrased by Bellah, who in the mid-1970s called for a “reappropriation of tradition” (143) which displays the characteristics of Fogle’s conversion experience and echoes the cultural context in which it occurs:

[o]ur reappropriation of tradition then must be in a sense “negative” – that is, critical ... an authentic reappropriation is the direct opposite of the nostalgic, sentimental, and uncritical presentation of tradition in the mass media. They offer tradition as palliative. We need tradition as stimulus to rebirth. (143-4)

4. Conclusions

If Fogle understands his story as in part a rejection of hip, this phenomenon is one infused with a temporality governed by the new of fashion and showbusiness. Norman Mailer wrote of “the perpetual climax of the present” (1968, 286) present in hip, and it was this Wallace understood as the empty fetishizing of Lyotard’s more earnest “*is it happening?*” In his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” he found this process exemplified in television:

The modes or presentation that work best for TV – stuff like “action,” with shoot-outs and car wrecks, or the rapid-fire “collage” of commercials, news, and music videos, or the “hysteria” of prime-time soap and sitcom with broad gestures, high voices, too much laughter – are unsubtle in their whispers that, somewhere, life is quicker, denser, more interesting, more ... well, *lively* than contemporary life as Joe Briefcase knows it. This might seem benign until we consider that what good old average Joe Briefcase does more than almost anything else in contemporary life is watch television, an activity which anyone with an average brain can see does not make for a very dense and lively life. (Wallace, 1997b, 39)

For Wallace, hip – understood as part of postmodernity – turns the now into a perpetual climax, objectifying the event while simultaneously preventing the viewer from experiencing such a moment themselves. *Infinite Jest*, the film at the centre of Wallace’s second novel, induces this sort of stasis – it is so watchable it forbids any other activity until the watcher dies. These worries also manifest themselves in Wallace’s structural choices in *The Pale King*. Conversion is, after all, a sort of ultimate now, for Bellah one akin to revolution,⁸¹ in which change happens so thoroughly that one feels that one is born anew. Because of that, it is open to attempts to fetishize it. Wallace’s suspicion of “epiphanies done dramatically” is a suspicion of the manipulative power of fetishization, epiphanies done dramatically for the kind of “childhood entertainments” the substitute so despises. For Wallace, the generation gap initiated in the sixties by mass media privileges this kind of fetishization of the momentarily new against a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between the past, the present, and the future which also simultaneously preserves the possibility of the truer now seen in experiences like Fogle’s

⁸¹ Bellah: “Revolution, like conversion, is an act of liberation, a leaving of old structures” (34).

conversion. That this more nuanced and subtle understanding is also at points difficult to cohere into a whole should not discourage one from the effort. Indeed, in Wallace's case, such difficulty is the mark of the kind of dogged ethics the substitute and Fogle come to propose; in Fogle's desire to find some form of reconciliation between his certainty of his conversion and his difficulty in finding the right narrative for it, Wallace depicts perhaps most clearly the kind of ambivalence we've noted throughout this thesis, one in which not only experiences of time and their narration are found difficult to reconcile, but also one characterized by the struggle to accommodate utopian possibility into an honest assessment of history.

If the speakers in the civics section suggest the sixties was when the American utopia died, Marianne DeKoven suggests in *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* that "the question of utopia [was] at the center of the sixties movements" (24). These two positions are not as opposed as they may initially seem. For both, the sixties is the locus of the utopian, and if DeKoven sees the sixties as the "endpoint and transformation" (271) of a "quintessentially or characteristically American phenomenon" (270), such quintessence or established character must surely come from its extension in time, precisely that which the civics believers assert. Indeed, not only does DeKoven suggest that "[t]he real heyday of American utopianism was not in the sixties but rather in the nineteenth-century antebellum period," she also provides a "brief history of American utopianism" (270), which indicates an acknowledgement of the importance of thinking utopia and history together. The civics believers would also agree with DeKoven's assessment of the "defeat and repudiation of utopia in the wake of the sixties" (24), even if they would disagree over the particular content of such utopias and the cause of death. Crucially though, they concur that the *form* of utopia was killed in the sixties by an evacuation of its content, whatever that may be. *The Pale King* is perhaps more hopeful than DeKoven about the possibilities for utopia in what she calls "the post-utopian 1970s" (272). Wallace does not view Fogle's conversion as representative of DeKoven's "post-utopian utopianism [in which] utopia ... can only be imagined outside, and in explicit negation of, history" (284), but rather, in trying to reconcile the competing impetuses towards fidelity to the now and the good work of contextual historicization, conceives of it as an attempt to accommodate both utopia and history. If Fogle's obverse conversion runs against one version of American history, Wallace also suggests utopia can be (re-)reached by way of a re-connection with another history. DeKoven's assertion that "[p]ostmodern, post-sixties utopia is limited, in all senses" (287) is couched in poststructuralist terms she

sees positively: “multiple, diffuse, provisional; contained, subdued, partial, and incorporated” (287). While we might suggest that this doesn’t sound very much like utopia at all, it is nonetheless true that *The Pale King* also re-conceptualizes utopian thought, though certainly Wallace would be harsher on the postmodern than DeKoven is – she embraces its construction of “the limited possible” (287) when Wallace would surely claim that it didn’t allow even for that. And when the context is the one DeKoven sets out – the possibilities for utopia in a “post-utopian” environment – such limitation and temperance can only seem like a mournful compromise, a more dispiriting version of Niebuhr’s humility. *The Pale King* avoids this by rejecting a sense of the event as de-historicized action in favour of an emboldening utopian entry into history. From this perspective, the most resonant image of Fogle’s narrative might well be a television soap opera: watching *As the World Turns*, he realizes that he is distanced from history – the world turns without him – but in this moment of revelation he is pulled back into history and back into the world.

Coda: The Changing Faces of Historicization

In this thesis, my main intention has been to investigate how certain recent novels about the events of the sixties conceive time, history, and temporal experience, a task I have found most useful to conduct through the kinds of close readings present here. Although there is the risk in these kinds of readings of both over-extrapolating significance and resorting to sweeping claims about the importance of particular trends, I hope that where the thesis has tried to extrapolate larger meanings from the presence of specific characteristics found in these novels those meanings have been sought in the service of gleaning a greater and more acute understanding of the texts at hand. While such larger significances are undoubtedly present – and in a way this thesis has relied implicitly on that – in this brief coda I would like to highlight a number of points which have emerged in the course of conducting the readings that comprise this thesis, in order, if nothing else, to indicate the way forward for further elaboration and development of this work.

All of the following remarks may be considered to derive from the first and most clearly identifiable issue: the importance of both conducting and paying attention to the processes of historicization. This importance immediately comes with two supplementary points that are also inseparable from it: firstly, that there are different kinds of historicization, and secondly that these various kinds have as many problems or potential damaging effects as they do solutions or salutary ones. As Jane Bennett's questioning of Marxist conceptions of materialism and Wolf's distance from Jameson's Marxist-inflected call for historicization seem to suggest, some kinds of historicization actually seem to be (at least partly) responsible for the very errors these novelists identify in the New Left and the counterculture.⁸²

If historicization is important and there are different kinds, a related point – and one especially relevant with regard to the sixties – is that ideas and concepts of historicization are changing, even among the writers called post-boomers or post-postmodern. This in particular points the way to further developments of this project. I have placed my reading of Wallace's *The Pale King* last not just because it represents in many ways the most acute

⁸² One possible interesting path to follow might be the examination of the relationship between historicization and political and literary radicalism. How does the former aid or mitigate against the latter, inasmuch as it helps us understand and learn from the failures of sixties radicalism but also aims to remain in some way faithful to its spirit, and perhaps even to re-ignite it?

exhibition of the issues the other novels bring to light, but also because – to engage in a moment of the anticipation of retrospection – it might come to be seen as a hinge marking a point of development in the mini-genre of contemporary novels about the long sixties. Indeed, the phrase “the long sixties” might be said to come into its truest focus in this emerging development. If *The Pale King* seeks to place the sixties in relation to wider American historical narratives, it also seeks to loosen the imaginative grip the period has on the cultural imagination insofar as it tries to re-balance its dominance over post-war American history by re-formulating our cultural associations with the 1950s and 1970s – unsettling our narratives of conformism, freedom, and dissolution that accompany those decades. As I have been writing this thesis, a number of novels have appeared (unfortunately too late to be considered here) which seem to develop and extend this characteristic of Wallace’s novel. Jonathan Lethem’s *Dissident Gardens* (2013) for instance, with its examination of a family of radicals stretching from the moment of the greatest influence of the Communist Party of the United States in the 1930s through the revelations of Khrushchev’s “secret speech” in 1956 to that decade’s beatnik scene, to the sixties and beyond, ending with the Occupy movement of 2011, or A.M. Homes’ *May We Be Forgiven* (2012), in which a Nixon scholar is not only the protagonist but one who engages in a revisionist biographical history of the President. Michael Chabon’s *Telegraph Avenue* (2012), with its characters’ formative youthful interaction with the Black Panthers, is another novel that re-reads the sixties in interesting ways. In an essay entitled “O.J. Simpson, Racial Utopia and the Moment That Inspired My Novel” written for the *New York Times Magazine*, Chabon implied that this “moment” encompassed a number of different timelines. If *Telegraph Avenue* “was born in Los Angeles, on Oct. 3, 1995, the day Judge Lance Ito unsealed the O.J. Simpson verdict and made it known to the world” (2012a), it is because that moment stirred in Chabon a particular sadness associated with an earlier time. As he explains,

I was sad because I knew that my astonishment at the public celebration, like the astonishment of any astonished white person under the circumstances, was indexed directly to the absence of black people in my life. It was the blinking indicator on my dashboard, letting me know that my connection to the lives and feelings of black people had been cut. (2012a)

If this quotation reminds us of a hugely important aspect of the sixties not covered by the novels considered in this thesis (the civil rights movement in particular, race in general⁸³) for Chabon the severing of this connection was particularly felt because it seemed a betrayal of the sixties ideals he grew up with, as he remembers:

In the fall of 1969, when I was 6, my family moved to Columbia, Md. Columbia was a new town, a planned community, a City of the Future built ex nihilo in the middle of what had been tobacco country, about 30 miles from Washington. It was avowedly utopian in its aims, transformative in its ambitions. It featured large, well-tended swaths of public open space, schools without classrooms, accessible public transportation, a single ecumenical worship center shared by all faiths, streets named for the works of great poets and novelists. Most wondrously of all, this particular City of the Future was integrated ... On the street where I grew up, there were more black families than white. I tackled, head-faked, ate dinner with, teased, admired, quarreled with, lusted after, learned to dance from, had crushes on, watched television and eventually drank beer with black girls and boys from the time I was 6 until the day I left for college. (2012a)

Telegraph Avenue, then, pivots around a number of temporal strands: 1995-2012, the distance between the “moment” the novel was “born” at the verdict of the Simpson trial to the date of its publication; and 1969-1995, that between the Chabon family’s move to Columbia and Michael’s remembrance of his forgotten history. Within the novel, too, there is a superficially shorter period which opens up to much longer ones: *Telegraph Avenue* is a novel not just set in 2004 but one which examines the year’s place in recent history, as indicated by the scene in which one the protagonists has a conversation with Barack Obama, then a Senator who would come to prominence at that year’s Democratic Party Convention. But Obama’s presence in a novel that deals so much with issues of race and class – the record store, Brokeland Records, at the centre of the novel is ran by best friends Nat and Archie, the former white, the latter black, on a street that marks a dividing line of sorts between the predominantly white, affluent Berkeley and the black and poor Oakland

⁸³ Although this omission is in some respects the result of a similar one on the part of the novelists considered in this thesis – none of them deal in any great detail with race and the sixties – it is also an active decision on my part in response to these novelists’ ignorance. To touch briefly on the subject would arguably do it less justice than not touching on it at all. Furthermore, the cohort of novelists under scrutiny here are overwhelmingly white and middle-class. If I were to consider historicization, race, and the sixties, I would not want to rely on this comparatively narrow – although dominant – group.

– signals Chabon’s interest in how conceptions of race and class appear and change over the longer forty year temporal periods just mentioned. Opening with a set-piece featuring a character named “Mr. Nostalgia” (2012b, 13), *Telegraph Avenue* is a novel that examines the relationship between the Black Panthers and Barack Obama, but in a way that sees that relationship as part of a matrix of concerns that also includes the family inheritances symbolized by Nat and Archie’s wives’ midwifery business, Archie’s own impending fatherhood and the re-appearance of his Blaxploitation actor father, as well as the small and large histories embedded in local communities, economies, and geographical space which rise to the surface when

Gibson “G Bad” Goode, former All-Pro quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers, president and chairman of Dogpile Recordings, Dogpile Films, head of the Goode Foundation, and the fifth richest black man in America, [flies] up to Oakland in a customized black-and-red airship, brimming over with plans to open a second Dogpile “Thang” on the long-abandoned Telegraph Avenue site of the old Golden State market, two blocks south of Brokeland Records. (2012b, 11)

As this brief exploration suggests, Chabon’s novel – as well as, in different ways, Lethem’s and Homes’ – incorporate the sixties in more diffuse and oblique ways, in marked contrast to *The Invisible Circus*, *Eat the Document* and *Trance* in particular (even *Arcadia* makes concrete the setting of its first section by including references to the 1973 oil embargo). While the sixties has featured so prominently in the imaginations of the writers considered in this thesis, we might also be seeing the unsettling of the period as dominant and its placement in greater historical relief. Yet it should be clear that this does not mean it is of less interest; quite the contrary, because if this is the beginning of a generational recalibration, then the way the sixties moves from dominant to relatively historicized not only recalls a central issue of this thesis – the tension between the utopian now and historicizing contextualization – but also highlights precisely the processes of historicization that have been my interest here. Moments of overlap – or as DeKoven puts it, “pivot” (6) moments – are always more interesting than periods of dominance and hegemony.

This sense that the literary scene is currently undergoing a particularly interesting period of change and flux has been observed on a wider scale, not just in the mini-genre we’ve been preoccupied with here. Andrew Hoberek has noted the “uneven transformations” (240) and

“tentative, local shifts” (241) in contemporary literature. He is clear, too, about the implications for literary study of this “phase of as-yet uncategorized diversity” (240). For Hoberek, “any effort to distinguish post-postmodern trends must ... adduce specific aspects of fictional form that both occur across a range of contemporary writing and depart in some way from postmodern norms” (237), and indulge “neither [in] assertions of postmodernism’s continued relevance nor of sweeping declarations of a potential successor but rather [make] concrete analyses of literary form and the historical conditions that shape it” (240). I agree with Hoberek, and in undertaking the close readings that form this thesis that is what I have aimed to do here. I don’t want to extrapolate or claim any more significance for the modes of historicization present in these sixties novels than I already have done, not just for the reasons Hoberek rightly outlines but also because I believe them to be significant in a number of ways we are only just beginning to examine. What we can say is that there are links between the sixties and post-postmodernist literature that warrant further investigation, particularly in view of the ongoing changes and developments just noted. While the novels considered in this thesis share a conviction that historical knowledge is important yet difficult to attain, as well as an appreciation of the multiplicitous nature of the long sixties’ histories and an interest in exploring narrative means for communicating these histories, they are also examples of the kinds of tentative, non-uniform changes taking place in twenty-first century American fiction, and the way they relate to and differ from one another is an important task this thesis has tried to begin to undertake.

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