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CULTING FICTIONS

An Enquiry into Cult Writers and their Readerships

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

This is an examination of the phenomenon of cult fiction. Starting with the Romantic poets this thesis shows that our understanding of contemporary cult fiction (from the 1960s to the late 1990s) is inextricably bound up with the failure of literary radicalism, a point I support through studies of Allen Ginsberg and Irvine Welsh. I will examine the factors that separate cult reading strategies from more conventional modes of interpretation, and by doing so I will analyse current opinions and recent research carried out in the area. Once I have established a framework for determining what makes a cult book I will bring it to the study of Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* (1991) and Don DeLillo's *Mao II* (1992). In doing so I will highlight the dangers and extremes of cult interpretation, which will be followed by an in-depth look at Mark Chapman, who shot dead singer John Lennon in 1980, and in particular his reading of JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).

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INTRODUCTION

Who owns cult fiction?

I would say that a 'cult books' section was oxymoronic and more or less analogous to a group of thick-set, violent men driving around in a car with the slogan 'Secret Police' on its side. (Will Self, *Sunday Observer*, 21 January, 1996)

In the last decade much attention has been paid to the idea of cult fiction. In academic circles the discussion of this literary phenomenon elicited enduring stereotypical observations about the bourgeois complicity of critical studies. However, though it is often name-checked in more popular domains such as journalism, discussions about cult have only served to confuse and obfuscate its importance as a popular reading strategy. Take, for example, the publication of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* in 1993. Here was a novel that achieved unparalleled cult status among its ever-expanding fan-base, and it's not difficult to see why. Welsh's depiction of an unrepresented section of society, giving a distinctive voice to "junkies" from an Edinburgh housing estate, as well as his adoption as a figurehead of a post-Beat renaissance – the so-called Chemical Generation – cosily resembled what we have come to associate with literary cultishness from the early 1960s onwards: radical, transgressive writing from the margins or, as Clive Bloom argues in *Cult Fiction: Popular Reading and Pulp Theory* (1996), 'anarchic, uncontrollable . . . cult status (a challenge to the ruling oligarchy)' (Bloom, 1996, p 15). Yet, while the novel's iconic status was quickly granted – though it has to be said, and as I will explain later, partly through

Welsh's self-conscious posturing – it was an unrivalled literary success, selling thousands of copies and spawning a *Trainspotting* franchise – film, T-shirt, countless literary imitations – that pushed it dangerously close to the mainstream. But if, as critic Andrew Calcutt argues in *Cult Fiction: A Reader's Guide* (1996), 'cult fiction is literature from the margins and extremes [...] it is usually a work that is written by or about, or gives voice to, or imagines a section of society that is different (deviates/transgresses) from the mainstream, and therefore offering a differing angle on social reality' (Calcutt & Shephard, 1996, p x), then how can a cult book be a popular culture success? How can something that is dangerously positioned on the periphery of society be subsumed by a mass readership without losing its radical edge? Or, as Will Self puts it above, how can a cult book be transgressive when it is safely served up – note his use of quotation marks – in a cult books section?

As academics and critics are often slow to respond to revelations in the realm of popular culture, the type of fiction under discussion, with this internal contradiction, was the subject of widespread condemnation yet also eager yet uncritical adoption and bemusement.

As the articles appeared and literary debate snowballed, old and familiar battle-lines were drawn between the critical establishment and popular culture. However, in their exchanges, something was sadly omitted – a sober

examination of cult fiction. By way of a precedent, the most illuminating historical precursor is camp, as cult fiction's reception in the late 1990s has striking similarities to that of camp in the mid-1960s. Therefore, Susan Sontag's pronouncement, 'Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described' (Sontag, 1994, p 275), is this thesis's mission statement.

'Still, defining "cult" is a risky business' (Calcutt & Shephard, 1988, p xiii)

Literary cultishness is unmistakably a sensibility. On a basic level, it is a reader's, or more commonly a community of readers', direct – and at times difficult to establish – emotional reaction to novel or piece of fiction. As I hope to argue, a cult reading of a text differs from a conventional interpretation because it is a more vigorously involved and symbiotic one, and tends to convey much about the psychological condition of the reader. Just how difficult it is to analyse can be demonstrated in the extreme reaction of Mark Chapman, a fanatical reader of JD Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), who assassinated John Lennon

in 1981 and blamed his actions on his reading of the book.¹ How can his interpretation, his “cult” reading of the text be rigorously analysed? Well, the first important aspect to establish is that when we talk of literary cultishness we are talking of often irrational and dangerous readings of the text. Analysis is indeed a ‘risky’ undertaking, and in this we need to remind ourselves that we are dealing with the fanatical and often pseudo-religious sensibilities of a readership that forms delimited boundaries around the text. In this respect any discussion of cultishness must be approached, as JP Telotte suggests in *The Cult Film Experience* (1991), with due caution to the ‘warning sign, a psychic surgeon general’s report, denoting taboo intellectual, emotional, and even spiritual territory’ (Telotte, 1991, p8).

Extreme idealisation on the part of readers is one reason why cult fiction often seen as touching taboo areas. Overwhelming admiration for a character, or in many cases the author, or an overzealous – and often erroneous – interpretation of the book’s message lead to imitative behaviour so intense it can override accepted psychological behaviour. This is partly why it is difficult to pinpoint a cult ‘canon’, as the reading habits of readers can’t be said to conform adequately to accepted literary reception. However, there is a tangible ‘body’ of cult books – classics even – which, taken from different genres and eras, will help me discuss

¹ Chapman believed Lennon to be a ‘phony’ and saw himself as the Catcher of his generation (Dan Collins, UPI, 24.08.1981). He read an extract from the book at his trial and was had it at the scene of the crime.

the phenomenon. To that end I will be discussing the novels, theories and writers that have been included in Thomas Reed Whissen's *Classic Cult Fiction: A Companion to Popular Cult Fiction* (1992), *Cult Fiction: A Reader's Guide* and *Cult Fiction: Popular Reading and Pulp Theory*.² To this list of cult writers I wish to study, I will introduce the works of Don DeLillo, in particular *Mao II* (1992).

The first important aspect to note is that cult reading differs from more conventional reading strategies because 'nowhere in literature is the interaction between text and reader so flagrantly symbiotic' (Whissen, 1992, p xiii). Where a cult reader differs to a normal reader is that the former is more prepared to treat the text as gospel, as moral instruction and guidance, and as the evocation of the biological term "symbiosis" suggests, a relationship between text and reader that is mutually more involved. As Whissen argues, cult readers are prepared to do 'an awful lot of "reading into"' (Whissen, 1992, p xii). Although the same could be argued for books that don't inspire cult reactions, 'in the case of a cult book the degree of reader involvement is much higher, so high in fact that readers and critics are usually in violent disagreement over the book's message, not to mention its literary merit' (Whissen, 1992, p xii). Just as leaders of religious cults prey on the emotionally vulnerable and politically disenfranchised, cult books, through a web of different cultural and psychological factors that I will explain in the course of the thesis, encourage the reader to make a profound identification

² Novels such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Catch-22* (1961), *Naked Lunch* (1959), *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and *Steppenwolf* (1927) and writers such as Allen

with the books' messages. Many have read Salinger's classic, only a handful would read it and state: 'If you were able to view the actual copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* that was taken from me on the night of Dec. 8 [sic], you would find in it the hand written words: "This is my statement."' (Associated Press, 02.09.1981).

From a systematic point of view it is not enough to conclude that cult reading involves a symbiotic relationship; it is the critic's job to get underneath the emotional responses and analyse, as far as possible, why exactly these types of readings are performed. Whissen begins to broach this particular area. According to him, this symbiotic relationship between text and reader is facilitated when:

The author supplies a central character who is close to what was once known as a *naïf*, someone a little too good for this world but whose charming innocence tempts us to follow in his path. There is something of the *naïf* in . . . every cult hero from Werther and Eugene Gant to Holden Caulfield and Howard Roark, and even to a madman like Lou Ford in Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*, who becomes the victim of his own helplessness. When vulnerable reader meets vulnerable hero, their identities literally fuse, and a cult reader – and thus a cult book – is born (Whissen, 1992, p xxxvi).

A cult reading transcends a normal reading when the disparate strands of a reader's experience are reflected, albeit narcissistically, in the hero of the novel.

This is when 'the book's story becomes the reader's own private experience, even though scores of other readers are experiencing the same illusion' (Whissen, 1992, p xxi). A symbiotic reading then would appear to be an appeal to the ego of the reader, a selfish and naïve presumption that the book was written only for him/her. This transcends the act of conventional interpretation and evolves in to a case of 'extreme' ownership, which is supported by Chapman's description of Salinger's novel: 'I put it against my face, and I inhaled deeply, drinking the aroma ... through my nostrils and my skin. And I felt: "Here is a way that I can identify with"' (Jones, 1992, p216).

Such is the identification with the novel that readers often feel an affinity with the work that most speaks, as they perceive it, their situation in the confusing milieu of contemporary society, and invariably leads them to imitate their cult hero's 'detachment from the world, his rejection of and by society, his self-consciousness, his alienation' (Whissen, 1992, p xxvii). Whissen elaborates this line of thought by describing the *Werther* cult in Europe, in which readers of the novel made the ultimate identification and symbiotic reading of Werther's plight by committing suicide in the same fashion as Goethe's hero.

It is when Whissen begins to expand on *how* such symbiotic readings are executed and sustained that the difficulties of a full critical examination of such an emotive subject are highlighted. 'Still', as Calcutt would have it, defining cult is

a risky business. The critic states unconvincingly that 'cult books have a mesmerising effect', 'a passionate intensity', 'a fever that raises temperatures'. This is hardly the kind of accuracy befitting a thorough assessment. However, Whissen is correct when he acknowledges that the emotionally loaded terms are in many ways a direct throwback to Romanticism. The critic cites the age as one that moves towards a celebration of the senses, and he evokes the legend of Prometheus, but more centrally the figure of Goethe's Werther, as the model for all cult heroes. In drawing a lineage from the Romantic period to the heroes of 1950s and 1960s, I hope to open a rich seam of valuable analysis to demonstrate how the angst-ridden, disillusioned, even melancholic narrator as we find in most cult fiction from *Werther* to *Catcher*, has a lineage traceable to this period. I want to flesh out this lineage to reflect contemporary developments and show how figures such as Mark Renton in *Trainspotting* and Bill Gray in *Mao II*, though working on different levels and rebelling against the 'authority' of a different cultural era, are taken from the same blueprint: the rebel, the *naïf* set against cultural institutionalism.

Don Winslow is the kind of cult writer who is so good you almost want to keep him to yourself, as if letting everyone in on the

secret will somehow dilute the pleasure. So gulp down this book, tell all your friends, and remember – you heard it here first (Ian Rankin, press release for Don Winslow's *California Fire and Light*)

While Whissen asserts positive connotations for cult as a rite of passage from youth to maturity and from innocence to responsibility,³ he is alert to the fine line between instruction and what he terms *ego-reinforcement*. 'Cult books stroke the egos of cult readers,' he asserts, which may in fact, 'be the first law of cult fiction' (Whissen, 1992, pxxx). The critic follows this by a discussion on how cult readers often assume a certain superiority over others with their identification to a 'cause' self-consciously *not* of the masses. If a reader connects with the hero of a novel in a symbiotic way and if this hero is, as Whissen states, 'a little too good for this world', then the reader might assume a dangerous superiority and, even, he has it, 'snobbery of the self-appointed elitists of sensitivity' (Whissen, 1992, p xxx).

The emotion Rankin identifies above is a familiar one. It is the impulse to protect something which we hold dear, that little nugget of artistic purity – be it in music, literature, or art – from over-exposure, or from being transferred into an another domain where the cultural apparatus for judging its worth is radically different. Take, for example, Turandot's *Nessun Dorma* during the 1990 World Cup. It became an anthem sung in every stadium; hummed by bricklayers and office workers the world over. It even entered the Top 40. But for classical music

³ 'Cult books are necessary waystations along the road to discovery and enlightenment' (Whissen, 1992, p xxxviii).

purists, its attraction was now lost as its formal qualities were unthinkingly and uncritically accepted. The same impulse is implicit in cult fiction. Look at the way Rankin unquestioningly assumes that a cult writer is one that you will automatically want to 'keep' to yourself – and, just as Sontag observed about camp, the idea of literary cultishness is necessarily esoteric. Cult readers will furiously guard their object of affection against the threat of a perceived mass audience. They do not wish the purity of their 'secret', their special symbiotic reading – note how Rankin's advice that the reader should not just read but to 'gulp' down the text quickly before anyone notices resembles the way Chapman 'drinks' *The Catcher in the Rye* – to be somehow diluted. Thus, to borrow Sontag's definition on camp, the cult book becomes 'something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques' (Sontag, 1994, p275).

There is a huge amount of ego-massaging in cult fiction. Consider how Rankin place great emphasis on the fact that *he* is the person who has deemed this book worthy. Cult readers often sever ties with 'normal' society and as such often have a certain contempt for it; the delimited boundaries of the readership mark a place where egos are massaged: 'Instead, then, of educated humility, what their followers too often learn is smugness and vanity' (Whissen, 1992, pxxxii). Cult readers, as Whissen states, have the potential to be vain, self-appointed elitists. Again, this echoes Sontag's observations on camp. Cult is extremely self-conscious and like camp it 'sees everything in quotation marks' (Sontag, 1994, p

280). Where readers of a 'normal' text see a message in a novel, cult readers see 'sacred' messages. As Will Self states, 'A cult book is by definition obscure, amenable only to a small clique of cognoscenti' (Self, *Sunday Observer*, 21 January, 1996)

If literary cultishness is concerned with the esoteric and ego-reinforcement, then the rise of the intellectual, the 'cognoscenti', cannot be far behind. Whissen speaks of the intellectual readers 'who pride themselves on their intelligence [and who] easily identify with characters who take pride in theirs, and in this way one ego reinforces another' (Whissen, 1992, p xxxi). This is not perhaps the 'intellectual' as envisaged by critics such as Andrew Ross in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (1989) and John Carey in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), but they are close cousins.

This idea of the intellectual attempting to consolidate his position in the face of the 'revolt of the masses' has significant ramifications for the study of cult. It would be foolish if this thesis ignored the way intellectuals have historically absorbed and tamed radicalism – the same radicalism that cult fiction claims to wield. With the exception of contemporary cult successes such as *Trainspotting*, the reception of a cult novel involves a complex process of give and take with society: too much exposure and it loses the sense of its cult perimeters, too little and the text becomes unbelievably obscure and it loses its ego reinforcement

value: it loses a power in which the intellectual can differentiate himself as an elitist of sensitivity, 'I have detected all too often is not obsession but affection on the part of the marginal intellectuals who would sooner display than actually read whichever book the literary establishment has decreed shall grace the cocktail tables this season' (Whissen, 1992, pxv).

'Someone sent him a severed finger in the mail. But that was in the sixties' (DeLillo, 1992, p 31)

How can a book be an undoubted commercial success yet still be termed cult? That cult fiction was once crowned with a radical reputation is no surprise; that it is still seen as retaining a sense of transgressiveness is inexcusable. Cult fiction, as a significant arm of the counterculture, might have first become a noticeable concept in the 1960s, when the desire to experiment with cultural and political alternatives had a significant impact on the experimentation with literary form. Whissen is quick to say that cult fiction is the 'barometer of our cultural history' because in it we can see the great countercultural elixir that sustained such luminaries that formed the Beat movement in the early 1960s. But the ways in which Salinger, Joseph Heller and Goethe opened up a dialogue with their respective cultural environments are fundamentally different from that of Welsh or Bret Easton Ellis reflects the capitalist society of today.

In the 1960s, cult fiction might well have been radical, DeLillo's severed finger a militant gesture, but what about now, in a society that is selling transgressiveness back to the consumer in a sanitised cult books section of a large bookseller's department store? If cult fiction is increasingly adopted by the mainstream, now a section in book shops, what does that say about the society that contemporary cult authors are reflecting? In answering this I wish to expose how cult fiction has lost its transgressiveness by proving it has become co-opted into the capitalist loop. This will also give me a platform from which to disagree with Whissen's observation that: 'Whether or not the book becomes a cult favourite depends on factors no author can control' (Whissen, 1992, p xi). I believe writers can now self-consciously court cult status; it has become a publisher's Valhalla, a willing home for lucrative niche marketing. So Salinger and Heller's dialogue with their cultural environments might have been an adversarial one, but Welsh's barometer is measuring something completely different:

transgression is no longer as transgressive as it once was. Instead of it being a form of disconnection from society at large, society is now trying to sell itself back to us through shared notions of transgressive activity. What was the counterculture is now over-the-counterculture, the deviant behaviour at the core of cult fiction has reached the middle of the marketplace (Calcutt & Shephard, 1988, p xvi).

CHAPTER ONE

Romantic Agony

Commentators, including the three I will discuss in this thesis, Andrew Calcutt, Clive Bloom and Thomas Whissen, associate cult fiction with transgressive qualities. In many ways, this is a reputation that was secured during the 1960s when cult books became an integral part of, even a bible for, the countercultural movement. Whissen is correct to associate the cult fiction that is produced in the 1960s with that of the (mostly British) Romantic period, after all the two are similar in as much as in they were eras in which writers had much to rebel over. The Romantics might have had Neoclassicism, but the counterculture had modernity to react against; Ginsberg had Vietnam, but his hero William Blake had issues such as slavery to attack. Whissen proffers that the central impetus cult fiction inherits from this period is the Romantic agony, though, frustratingly, he fails to elucidate how he arrives at this, instead using a discussion of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* as a case study. I think it is crucial at this stage to analyse fully what Whissen means by the 'Romantic agony' by retracing a short history of the Romantic poets' rebellion.

'I sing: fit audience let me find, though few', Wordsworth, 'The Recluse'

The Romantic period, stretching loosely from 1798 to 1832, is generally thought of as one in which a new radical sensibility emerged, inspired, and envisioned, by

leading writers and artists. This was a pivotal era rebelling against the perceived shackles of Neoclassicism and Enlightenment thought,⁴ when humanitarian concerns such as slavery, poverty and inequality began to occupy poets and writers, especially after the successes of the American and French Revolutions. William Wordsworth broke with literary precedent to write sympathetic poems such as 'The Female Vagrant', dealing with social outcasts. Blake concerned himself, as did the early Robert Southey, with racial intolerance in antislavery poems such as 'Little Black Boy' from *Songs of Innocence*. And Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, advocated empathy with the social pressures on women. Like the literary agitators of the 1960s, these writers were searching for a radical egalitarianism. In *America*, Blake celebrates the spirit of the revolution and calls for a war of independence on British shores. Robert Burns in his 1794 poem 'Ode for General Washington's Birthday' called on 'Ye sons of Liberty,/Columbia's offspring, brave as free' to flame the fires of rebellion. To Burns that day was not far away: 'Its comin yet for a' that' ('For a' that and a' that', 1795). In this spirit Coleridge and Robert Southey even advocated a Pantisocracy – a utopian ideal of setting up an egalitarian commune.

⁴ Though this is a crude generalisation – both Neoclassicism and Enlightenment were much more sophisticated; Peter Gay's excellent *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1973) stresses the inaccuracy in deeming it merely an exaltation of 'reason' to which Romanticism reacted against, while Stephen Prickett has argued for a form of republican Neoclassicism that greatly influenced such writers as Blake in *England and the French Revolution* (1989) – it is an adequate starting point to discuss Whissen's observations.

At the time, Francis Jeffrey described them as a 'sect of poets', 'dissenters from the established systems' who had 'antisocial principles, and distempered sensibility' (*Edinburgh Review*, 1802, p12), while at a later date, Edmund Wilson in *Axel's Castle* (1931) spoke of this era as one in which 'the writer is either his own hero, or unmistakably identified with his hero . . . They vindicate the rights of the individual against the claims of society as a whole – against government, morals, conventions, academy or church. The Romantic is nearly always a rebel' (Wilson, 1931, p10). But if the Romantic poets were striving to achieve such positive change then why did some contemporaries attack them for their solipsism and dislocation from the concerns of the reading public? Answering this question will give a better understanding of what Whissen means when he talks of the Romantic agony.

Was the Romantic period one of revolutionary poetics? Was the Romantic poet such a rebel? Byron did not think so. Neither did William Hazlitt. And nor did many of the subsequent generations of critics of the era such as MH Abrams. Byron believed that the Lake Poets had lost sight of their revolutionary aims of *social* change, instead turning the spirit of literary rebellion inward and rearticulating it in terms of *spiritual* change. With the recent publication of Coleridge's *The Statesman's Manual* (1816), *Biographia Literaria* (1817) and *The Friend* (1818) in mind, Byron in the 'Dedication' to *Don Juan* attacked the Lake Poets for their elevated position: 'duly seated on the immortal hill' (McConnell,

1978, p182), and above the everyday concerns of society. Byron felt that Wordsworth and Coleridge had lost some kind of poetic impetus in leading, or in the least instructing, society, the kind of which they had expressed in the 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). In that publication, Wordsworth advocated a 'systematic defence' of a new, experimental poetics that reflected the 'real language of men in a state of vivid sensation'. The role of the poet was to 'lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration' (Wu, 1994, p250-1: 260). But Byron saw something different had resulted.⁵ By 1813, the once radical Robert Southey had already turned Conservative – as Wordsworth and Coleridge did later their careers – and, to Byron's chagrin, he also assumed the dubious mantle of Poet Laureate. One of Southey's first official roles was to write a poem on the death of George III in 1820. The resultant *A Vision of Judgment*, with its exaggerated idolatry of a relatively unsuccessful monarch, enraged Byron with its turncoat politics and refutation of the ideals of the French Revolution. His reply to this inflated veneration (*The Vision of Judgment*) was a sharp attack on Southey's failure to uphold the radical potentialities of poetry: 'For pantisocracy he once had cried/Aloud ... Then grew a hearty anti-jacobin [sic]' (McConnell, 1978, p180).

⁵ This is not to forget that Byron, as part of the bourgeoisie, thought literature should be nothing more than 'recreation': 'To the Adam Smith-ite or Bentham-ite reformer, everything which was not useful ('use' being defined in economic terms) must be excluded from the sphere in which commerce, manufacture and statecraft worked out their 'progressive' destinies. Literature was acceptable *only* as a serious recreation' (Calder, 1987, p54).

Byron vents his frustration further in the 'Dedication' to *Don Juan*. 'You're a poet – Poet-laureate,/And representative of all the race,' he quips, 'Although 'tis true that you turned out a Tory at/Last – yours has lately been a common case; And now, my Epic Renegade! what are ye at?' (McConnell, 1978, p183). Where Wordsworth sees the unique and somewhat delicate sensibility of the poet – 'endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind' and 'the poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel' (Wu, 1994, p257: 260) – Byron only sees a pompous celebration of the inner sanctity of self-expression and self-indulgence, the 'Blackbirds in a pye [sic]', who only sing for the benefit of authority figures: 'A dainty dish to set before the King' (McConnell, 1978, p183).

Byron's attack highlights a failing of the radical poets in the Romantic era: overt, practical action replaced with quietism and solipsism. Notice that this tendency is a failing – it is not yet an 'agony' in Whissen's sense – of how a poet can affect change in society. It was the solipsistic rhetoric of the self-proclaimed poet-genius Coleridge that received the deepest cut of Byron's ironic verse. The notion of genius was very popular in the late 1700s. William Duff's *An Essay on Original Genius* (1767) became common critical currency in the early Romantic period and almost certainly influenced Wordsworth's and Coleridge's ideas on imagination, the prerequisite of genius. According to Duff, genius had a clear

'religious' task and was 'destined by Providence for enlarging the sphere of human knowledge', with a mind possessing 'native and radical power' capable of discovering 'something new and uncommon in every subject' (Duff, 1767, p5).

This is similar in sentiment to that of the 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads*. This became the enduring image of the Romantic period, the power of the imagination, the 'lamp' as MH Abrams would later suggest, 'by its plastic power of inventing new associations of ideas, and combining them with infinite variety, is enabled to present a creation of its own'.

With such power, Duff stated, 'mankind must be contented to follow the path marked out by such illustrious leaders' (Duff, 1767, p86). Thus the genius becomes a spiritual leader, godlike in his task, who will instruct society. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), for example, Blake celebrates: 'The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them ... When thou seest an Eagle, thou seest a portion of Genius; lift up thy head' (Wu, 1994, p82). The religious connotations behind these genius-leaders will emerge again and again. Abrams describes how the 'Romantics do not write direct political and moral commentary but "the politics of vision", uttered in the persona of the inspired prophet-priest' (Frye, 1963, p44); Donald Kuspit in *The Cult of the Avant-garde* (1993) uses it to describe the avant

garde⁶; and Allen Ginsberg would employ the 'Poet is Priest'⁷ imagery throughout his career.

Byron was having none of it. In short, he believed the Lakers had failed in their 'high' aims as articulated in the 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* – to be the mediators between poetic and the public, to be the voice of people at the table of poetic discourse – a poet 'wandering with pedestrian muses': 'And Coleridge too has lately taken wing,/But like a hawk encumbered with his hood,/Explaining metaphysics to the nation;/I wish he would explain his explanation' (McConnell, 1973, p 183). Byron shows there is a fine line between instructing and cutting yourself off from a perceived boorish society. And, perhaps, if Byron stumbled into New York's Bohemian Bar many years later, frequented by the Beats and the avant garde in the early 1960s, he would feel vindicated to hear Amiri Baraka's deft comment: 'The torture of genius, genius unappreciated, genius assaulted by philistines, this is what was implied. Genius was not easy to understand or put up with'.⁸

Or, perhaps, he would have agreed with Michael Bakunin in *God and State* (1871), who sees the genius as having 'a horror and contempt for the politics and

⁶ The artist is 'a kind of Moses leading [the masses] out of their ordinary world of perception and away from their ordinary sense of life to a promised world of perception and an altogether novel sense of life' (Kuspit, 1993, p47)

⁷ 'Death to Van Gough's Ear'

⁸ Amiri Baraka in Ronald Sukenick's account of the underground, *Down and In* (1987)

questions of the day' and who were 'frankly reactionary, [taking] the side of the church against the insolence of the freethinkers, of the king against the peoples, and of all the aristocrats against the vile rubble of the streets'. Instead the genius tended towards 'the ungovernable outburst of individual vanities' (Bakunin, 1971, p98). It doesn't escape Byron that the Lakers had removed themselves from the public sphere. Not only had Coleridge 'taken wing', not only had they reneged on their radical ideals but their 'dint of long seclusion' was a sign that they were resting on their 'laurels for posterity' even though their 'bays may hide the baldness of [their] brows' (McConnell, 1973, p184). Byron ends the 'Dedication' by commenting on the Lakers' apostasy: 'To keep *one* creed's a task grown quite Herculean' (McConnell, 1973, p187). Those epic renegades seem a long way off. Hazlitt would come to the same conclusion.⁹

But is Byron being a little harsh here? After all, the Lakers did have an ambiguous relationship with society, which was cemented with their idea of the poet: one who is of the people, who feels what the people feel, yet one who is above the people, who is 'endued with more lively sensibility'. Centuries later this contradiction is still not resolved and is played out in debates surrounding the

⁹ In his 1818 Lecture 'On the Living Poets' Hazlitt derides the Lake Poets for losing the revolutionary purpose of integrating art and life and his aesthetic isolation: 'It was a time of promise, a renewal of the world and letters; and the Deucalions, who were to perform this feat of regeneration,' but sadly leaving Wordsworth to assume a moral and aesthetic superiority: 'He does not even like to share his reputation with his subject; for he would have it all proceed from his own power and originality of mind . . . He tolerates only what he himself creates; he sympathises only with what can enter into no competition with him'.

avant garde, Modernism and cult fiction. And to paraphrase the words of Rimbaud: how could the poet define the amount of the unknown awakening in his time yet be the multiplier of progress? The poet is one who *attempts* to lead a certain number of people from this ordinary world to a realm of unidentified but desired social, artistic and political freedom, but in what manner was this cerebral and sometimes obtuse vision of the poet to be appropriated by contemporary society in which it was reacting against, if this vision was in advance of that ordinary society? How can the blind see? Subsequent generations of writers who shared the same revolutionary outlook for literature such as the Beats were acutely aware of this dichotomy. No writer was more aware of this than Ginsberg, who succinctly tells us in *America*: 'America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood?' I will look at Ginsberg later, but for now it will suffice to say that the Beats inherited this contradiction, as John Pringle notes: 'If you're going to criticise the status quo, to set yourself against the cultural hegemony, then outside is not necessarily the place to be. A certain distance is necessary, but the inside-outside divide is too absolute. Outsiders can be easily dismissed' (Pringle, qtd in Trocchi's *Young Adam* (1999) p3).

MH Abrams sees it rather differently. In *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) and his essay 'English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age' that was included in Northorpe Frye's collection *Romanticism Reconsidered* (1963), he repositions the problem by suggesting that to appreciate the poetry of the era we must first

see that the 'great Romantic poems were not written in the mood of revolutionary exaltation but in the later mood of revolutionary disillusionment and despair' and it was a given that: 'The militancy of overt political action [had] been transformed into the paradox of spiritual quietism [...] hope [had] been shifted from the history of mankind to the mind of the single individual, from militant external action to an imaginative act' (Frye, 1963, p53). Instead of militant action, Abrams tells us, the reader had to cherish the Romantic poets for their 'disillusionment' and 'despair'. Abrams establishes that in the sixth book of *The Prelude* (Simplon Pass), Wordsworth has already transferred the loss of militant action to the imagination¹⁰: 'Wordsworth evokes from the unbounded and hence impossible hopes in the French Revolution a central Romantic doctrine ... by converting what has been man's tragic error – the inordinacy of his "pride" that persists in setting infinite aims for the finite man – into his specific glory and triumph' (Frye 1963: p56-58).

It is this turn from external revolutionary spirit onto internal spiritual realms; this transmutation of radical idealism into purely imaginative revolution, which

¹⁰ For still we had hopes that pointed to the clouds' to 'I was lost/Halted without an effort to break through/But to my conscious soul I now can say – "I recognise thy glory"' and 'Under such banners militant, the soul/Seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils/That may attest her prowess, blest in thoughts/That are their own perfection and reward' (Wu, 1994, p258). See also Coleridge's *France: An Ode*, which moves from outward support for the French Revolution: 'Oh Liberty! with profitless endeavour/Have I pursued thee many a weary hour', to the inward, quietist personal expression empowering the imagination: 'Possessing all things with intensest love,/Oh Liberty, my spirit felt thee there!' (Wu, 1994, p257)

Whissen sees as typical of the era. 'Cult fiction is a natural outgrowth of Romanticism,' he argues, 'that revolutionary movement in art and thought that dethroned reason and objectivity in favour of emotion and intuition' (Whissen, 1992, pxx). Whissen sees the roots of cult literature in democratic idealism, whether it be of the early 1800s or the 1960s, 'with all the promises and penalties that go with the dream of absolute freedom' (1992, pxx). Whissen aligns himself very closely with Byron when he talks of this peculiar Romantic 'energy': the drive to search for 'truth' and 'justice' which often results in (genius) writers – Byron would say the Lakers – retreating, sometimes bitterly, from a society that does not share their vision. It would seem Romantic artists, as Whissen and Byron view them, were apologists: articulators of a militant art form yet private conspirators in its failure.

Abrams's criticism here is important. The pride of Wordsworth is something that is present in many of cult fiction's heroes. The 'unbounded', and by implication unrealistic, hopes of effecting radical change, 'setting infinite aims' moves from being a disillusionment and is turned into some inward triumph. Setting infinite aims in the name of democratic idealism is precisely what cult fiction's naïfs¹¹ do, from fictional characters such as Holden, who wants to save children by being

¹¹ As shown earlier, Whissen sees the naïf character in terms of the novel's protagonist. I would like to extend this to include the authors, who themselves are given countercultural status due to their naïf-like qualities, which I will explain later. Writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Alexander Trocchi, Burroughs, etc. live the cult life that we associate with characters. This is not to say that in every instance a novel's protagonist is the author.

the catcher in the rye, and who, when we first meet him, is sitting isolated on Thomsen Hill 'next to the crazy cannon that was used in the Revolutionary War' (Salinger, 1994, p 2) – the implication being that he will be a revolutionary 'loose canon'; to Patrick Bateman, who is obsessed with ridding society of its underclass (albeit in a violent way); to Werther, who seeks an impossible union with a married woman; to a writer such as Ginsberg, who wants everybody to share his impossibly esoteric Blakean vision of the future. As we will see, more often than not this project is doomed to failure, and all that burns bright is the naïf's valiant attempt to move people – and often the result is an outburst of individual vanity. In the words of Abrams we must cherish cult heroes for their despair and disillusionment.

But Whissen has more to say. He thinks disillusionment in cult heroes is transferred and perpetuates a kind of artistic superiority and even arrogance – especially with the arrival of the 1960s. 'A cult book perpetuates the view that most people are blind, and it sets about demonstrating this by showing its heroes in conflict with hordes of philistines,' he says. 'The heroes of cult literature often appear smug and superior rather than wise and vigilant' (Whissen, 1995. pxxx). Behind this is Byron and Hazlitt's complaints of the immediacy and purity of Wordsworth's imagination; not only has the revolutionary stance been transformed to quietism but the primacy of emotion over reason.

We are now moving closer to the Romantic agony of *Classic Cult Fiction*. The 'agony' is a somewhat tongue-in-cheek reference to what Whissen sees as the self-inflicted angst, wallowing in self-pity as a result of this artistic despair, drawing a strange kind of joy from failure to connect with society – 'I sing: fit audience let me find, though few'. What is particularly interesting about Whissen's comments are the implications of immaturity. The cult hero, informed as it is by the Romantic agony, has a childish impetuosity: someone who all too easily gives into emotion and does not have faculty enough to reason like an adult. For the critic, the Romantics lived a contradiction: 'Romantics crave loneliness, yet it is precisely the pressures on loneliness that drive them to eventually seek other minds of similar inclination' (Whissen, 1992, pxxii) and, by implication, the cult hero is somewhat of a 'spoiled little brat': 'craving' something they *should* know to be bad for them, like children soon learn too many sweets are ultimately sickening. 'They want things both ways and will convince themselves, at least for the time being, that they can have things both ways' (Whissen, 1992, p46). This has its origins, he concludes, in the angst and despair that started with the Romantic artist and continues within the boundaries of cult fiction, 'Failure to have things both ways throws them into despair, and it is the luxury of this despair that is sometimes referred to as Romantic agony' (Whissen, 1992, pxxii). This notion of the writer as much-maligned, much-misunderstood brat will recur in this thesis, especially in the discussion of the counterculture and the Beats.

'Poesy has wreaths for you alone' Byron, 'Dedication' to *Don Juan*

For Whissen the prototype cult novel that displays this 'Romantic agony', is Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). The title tells the reader much: here is a book in which two factors will dominate: sorrow and youth. Werther is the misunderstood 'genius' brimming with passionate intensity and obsessive love for a woman he can never have. The power, the 'light' and the immediacy of his emotions are never in doubt but his maturity of the young romantic is. The fact that *Werther* is an epistolary novel is of great importance, as his early correspondence is less about communicating with a recipient than it is about soliloquising. Thus, uninterrupted, Werther's letters accentuate his hapless emotional outpourings – impromptu confessionals that centre on his *inner* experiences. As a result his letters are hastily conceived lyrical outbursts, sometimes barely grammatical and littered with exclamation marks. Werther's search for emotional intensity will, he tells himself, be fulfilled in a dalliance with Lotte, a married woman. Werther does little to discipline his emotions, and the epistolary form gives the reader the opportunity to witness his self-delusion and his inevitable slide toward despair. Werther begins to retreat into a fantasy world: a 'heavenly fantasy that makes everything seem like paradise is in my own heart' (Goethe, 1989, p27). It is at this stage that Werther witnesses the girls of the village collecting water at the river and he begins to bring the power of

imagination to the scene, very much in the same way that Wordsworth did with humble leech-gatherers: 'Oh, anyone who cannot share this feeling must never have refreshed himself at a cool spring' (Goethe, 1989, p27). Already Werther is differentiating between those who can 'feel' the intensity of the scene and those who are unable to. His next letter of 13 May is a paean to the Romantic imagination with phrases such as 'this heart of mine is turbulent', 'tumultuous blood' and 'excessive joy' and, tellingly, 'I am treating my poor heart like an ailing child: every whim is granted' (Goethe, 1989, p28). This, Whissen agrees, is very much in the spirit of the era 'to dethrone reason and exalt passion' (Whissen, 1992, p218).

Like the Romantic poets, Werther's vision once sought some kind of union with society and an end to class differences¹² but he fails to pursue it and retreats into a narcissistic self-imposed solitary confinement. Werther begins to harbour a hostile attitude to the unfeeling society around him: 'The human race is a monotonous affair. Most people spend the greatest part of their time working in order to live, and what little freedom remains so fills them with fear that they seek out any and every means to be rid of it. What a thing out human destiny is!' (Goethe, 1989, p29). This is a phrase you might think that could have been uttered by Wordsworth or Coleridge. What is Werther's response to this? He

¹² As demonstrated by: 'I well know we are not equal, nor can be; but I maintain that he who supposes he must keep his distance from what they call the rabble, to preserve the respect due to him, is as much to blame as a coward who hides from his enemy' (Goethe, 1989, p 28)

begins to contemplate suicide and the reader notices a certain pathological tendency towards self-destructiveness, his isolation from society intensifying his concentration on his personal sorrows. Werther is the naïf-like character wallowing in the self-pity in unrequited love with little discipline over his emotions and often surrenders to the 'moment'. Note the imagery of the child, surrendering to the moment.

The drift to Werther's suicide is evident as the novel progresses. "It is the fate of a man like myself to be misunderstood", which Whissen confirms, 'was destined to become the slogan of cult heroes ever after' (Whissen, 1992, p218). Werther, like the accusations levelled at the Romantics, was too idealistic to succeed in his pursuit of Lotte. It is this idealism that dooms him to failure. Werther's self-obsession and self-loathing, 'his self-absorption, his wish to go his own way, was a revolutionary note in a revolutionary age ... It signalled a retreat inward from the sweetly reasoned, intellectual consensus ... of the Enlightenment – a retreat into a private world of limitless fantasy and longing, morbidity and despair' (Whissen, 1992, p219). The misunderstood artist retreats to morbidity and despair at the unfeeling society around him. Werther is isolated in a rural part of Germany and in many ways his self-imposed exile is the thing that grieves him most. He sees 'solitude [as a] precious balm to my heart in these parasitic parts', a sentiment that has its precedent in the Romantic agony of poets like Coleridge or Blake, and suffering as his art form: 'My art is suffering' (Goethe, 1989, p26).

One of the main elements of cult fiction is suffering, the ability to suffer is what the hero, or naïf, does best. 'Since the dawn of Romanticism,' states Whissen, 'suffering has been a sign of sensitivity, of deep feeling, of moral superiority' (Whissen, 1992, pxxx). Delight in suffering is a motif present in almost every cult novel from *Werther* to *Catcher*.

The wounds of this Werther are self-inflicted and his slow movement toward suicide is due to his inability to keep check on his passions "til one day a growing passion overthrows his contemplative composure and destroys him' (Goethe, 1989 p62). This is the lot of the cult hero that will reverberate through literary history: 'the rebel angel so dear to the hearts of the Romantics, a hero who might lose in his struggle against authority but whose every torment was a moral victory for the indomitable spirit of denial' (Whissen, 1992, p223). Werther begins the novel in a spirit of brave rebellion; he ends it in submission with a botched suicide that only prolongs his suffering. The power of the imagination, as we see in 10 May 'My friend – But it will be the end of me. The glory of these visions, their power and magnificence, will be my undoing' (Goethe, 1989, p27)

This is where the popular image of the suffering artist is born; a man/woman against the odds – and who knows full well that he is fighting against the odds – but seen to have courage to battle on, albeit with an increasingly hostile attitude to society. It is a common trajectory for those 'elitists of sensitivity' to move from

outward radicality to inward scorn at society at large. 'Because they feel superior to the mob,' Whissen argues, 'many cult heroes are sorely lacking in civility, neglecting to let the rules of courtesy interfere with the frank expression of their opinions or the uninhibited exhibition of their moods.' Here is the point where Whissen connects with Byron's criticisms of the Lake poets; a common bond stretching from romanticism to cult fused together by an image of the artist as superior, opinionated and failing and constantly complaining about such failure. Writers of the Romantic period all have one thing in common: they suffer for their art. If the period dethrones, as Whissen sees it, reason and objectivity in favour of emotion, then it stands to reason that the more a writer *suffers* the more superior he might feel to the unthinking mass, and for the cult hero, 'the cup of sorrow is bottomless, and many delight on drinking thereof. And suffering is what cult heroes do best' (Whissen, 1992, p222).¹³

¹³ Or in the words of the Romantic era's last great poet, Percy Shelley, in his 1818 preface to *The Revolt of Islam*: 'Hence gloom and misanthropy have become characteristics of the age in which we live, the solace of a disappointment that unconsciously finds relief only in the wilful exaggeration of its own despair.'

CHAPTER TWO

Cult in context

I have so far looked at cult fiction's literary heritage in the Romantic era but said little about what makes it unique and worthy of academic study. At this point I would like to establish some ground rules, some laws that could be used to distinguish cult fiction from other types of fiction. To aid me in this I intend to look specifically at cult reading strategies and bring them to the analysis of Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* (1991) and Don DeLillo's *Mao II* (1992).

At best it may seem trite, at worst specious, to say that the first rule of cult fiction is that there are no rules: almost any book, be it outrageously popular or conceitedly esoteric, can be subsumed into a cult readership. However, if we accept, as Terry Eagleton does in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), that the 'construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artefact is ... inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class society' (Eagleton, 1990, p3), this observation is far from platitudinous. This, then, would seem like an appropriate place to begin an examination: for the apparent lawlessness of cult fiction, the 'violation of certain narrative formulas' (Telotte, 1991, p8), highlights two crucial factors. Firstly, cult status is predominantly bestowed on a book not by authors but by readers whose tastes and criteria vary dramatically and, secondly, that the absence of ground rules means the literary establishment find this type of fiction difficult to analyse.

The majority of the books under discussion have a propensity to reflect their time: cult fiction represents a general coming together of minds of a certain disposition. These novels can put a finger directly on the pulse of an era, despite often, though not exclusively, being written in a completely different age, a completely foreign environment or, similarly, set in an impossibly distant future. Cult books do this to the extent that Thomas Whissen argues that the 'persistence of cult fiction could also be viewed as a sign of cultural health' (Whissen, 1992, pxxxviii). Yet, in many instances, it is not necessary that a book be intentionally written to challenge or reflect up-to-the-minute political and social concerns. Cult readerships are not interested in pamphleteerists. Rather, what is important is that the book is sufficiently diffuse to inspire one or several communities of readers to feel it has something significant to say about the era in which they live; as Bruce Kavin suggests in his essay 'Beyond Midnight': 'What this sacred text gives its worshippers, and what they are grateful for, is a mirror. It tells them something they realise as the truth, something they have been waiting to hear and to have validated' (Telotte, 1991, p24). Kavin highlights something important to this discussion, something Whissen fails to take into account: namely cult audiences in the most do a lot of 'waiting'; there is a great deal of deliberation and cogitation as these cultural 'truths' filter down to the readerships of a certain era. They also do a lot of protecting. Everybody out with, those not privy to the cult text's message must play catch-up and gain access to the circle. These last points are important for they help add to the esoteric nature of cult fiction, for its

audiences like to feel they are in advance of everyone else: their secret, as Ian Rankin would have it with Don Winslow, is for meaning not to be too easily acquired.

With the exception of contemporary successes such as Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993), the experience of cult fiction invariably involves some kind of delay. In the case of intellectually challenging books such as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1962), it takes time for its message to seep from the cognoscenti to the wider readerships of a given milieu. For completely different reasons, *Catch-22* (1961), Joseph Heller's hugely popular satire on the bureaucracy and insanity of the military in the Second World War, took time to reach a cult fan base. In the late 1960s, it was read as an anti-Vietnam comment on the chaos of military intervention; Captain Yossarian's persistent attempts to evade a pointless war became a prescient example for insurgent draft-dodging element of US youth tuning in to Timothy Leary's legendary exhortation to drop out. Cult readerships, along with elements of the protest culture connected with and performed a symbiotic reading of a text that pitted itself against perceived authority of the era: it was a text that spoke to them about their struggle.

This model of appropriation extends to most other historical cult successes. Goethe's *Werther*, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) and *Steppenwolf* (1927), with their interest in Oriental mysticism, were dragged onto the 1960s scene and

revered for their insistence on the spiritual quest. Philip K Dick's futuristic *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968), which showed a post-apocalyptic vision of soulless America populated by a sub-human species, had significant ramifications for cult readers living with the ever-present threat of a nuclear holocaust. As I will explain, the ahistorical strategies of cult readerships are more revisionary than they are revolutionary. Timothy Corrigan in his essay 'Film and the Culture of Cult' included in Telotte's *The Cult Film Experience* (1991) suggests: 'Cults of any kind ... are cultural revisionists' (Telotte, 1991, p28). It is only with contemporary cult books that we find cult reputations are hurriedly bestowed, which, I will argue in a later chapter, has more to do with the immediacy of consumer capitalism.

But what is the significance of this revisionism to cult? According to Telotte:

What they do is to wrench representations from their naturalised and centralised positions and create what Eco terms 'glorious incoherence': crucifixes with motorcycles, lace over leather, Maoists in America, Woody Allen as Bogart. Here any sense of a legitimacy or true place for the original representations becomes exactly what is under attack: for film audiences and other cult groups, cult action is radical *bricolage*, the play with and reassembly of signifiers from strikingly different cultures and contexts (Telotte, 1991, p 28).

When the critic mentions 'legitimacy' and 'glorious incoherence' in this context, it is clear that he has in mind the dislocation of the linear narrative of historical progress and, in many ways, it is reminiscent of Roland Barthes' *jouissance*. As *Le Plaisir du Text* (1973) defines it, *jouissance* is the heightened form of pleasure that arises when there is a sense of interruption or breakdown of legitimacy in the text. 'Bricolage', though originates in Claude Levi-Strauss' *Structural Anthropology* (1963), reminds us of the act of reading that resists the totality of dominant narratives. Andrew Ross in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (1989) rearticulates this reading strategy as 'creative consumption', which is a way of expressing a 'resistance, symbolically or otherwise, to everyday domination, by redefining the meanings of mass-produced objects and discourses in ways that go against the "dominant" messages of the text' (Ross, 1989, p 53). As Fredric Jameson would argue, it is clear that an aspect of everyday domination that cult readerships are resisting is indeed history itself, and that when 'temporal continuities break down, the experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and "material", or in other words the present becomes so oppressive as to become 'unreality' – or unliveable' (Jameson, 1984, p34). 'History,' Barthes clarifies, 'is never anything but a "living contradiction"' (Barthes, 1973, p21), and it is certainly an aspect that cult readerships have difficulty with. This is why they indulge in what Douglas Coupland in *Generation X* calls 'Historical Slumming: The act of visiting locations

... where time appears to have been frozen many years back – so as to experience *relief* when one returns back to “the present” (Coupland, 1991, p13).

This political, geographical and cultural dislocation then is desirable and necessary. At first glance, cult fiction explores what it means to be on the margins, to be an outsider, so to steal elements from different eras and cultures adds to a reader's sense of curious, even furtive, alienation. Cult readers are literary magpies, as Coupland's account relates: 'Obscurism: The practise of peppering daily life with obscure references (forgotten films, dead TV stars, unpopular books, defunct countries, etc.) as a subliminal means of showcasing one's wish to disassociate from the world of mass culture' (Coupland, 1991, p67). Cult reading then champions an inscrutability that maintains a hostile attitude toward the mainstream – or as the Romantics might have it, the 'philistines'.

There is something very knowing about a cult readership's desire to shun mass culture, something we might be tempted to call camp. As Susan Sontag states, a camp gesture is open to a double interpretation, one that is capable of being understood by some and not others, one 'with a witty meaning for the cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders' (Sontag, 1994, p281). Cult readers want to survive without mass cultural numbing but in doing so they want to stroke their own egos in a common disgust at Sontag's idea of 'outsiders'. 'Since they see being an outcast as proof that they are not part of the

herd, rejection is ultimately as gratifying as flattery,' (Whissen, 1992, pxxxi). Cult fiction provides a language in which the participants can create a world that is not too easily encroached on by the mainstream. However, what Coupland's quote fails to establish is that the relationship between the cult reader and mass culture is dialectical and necessary.

The connection a book has with its cult readership happens regardless of an author's intention. Hesse and Goethe had little control over how different generations read their work. Joseph Heller intended his anti-war novel to reflect the conflict in Vietnam, but was surprised to see it adopted by the counterculture in such an emphatic way. *Catch-22* tapped into the 'zeitgeist' at just the right time when artists, radicals and poets were catching each other's heat and light.¹⁴

Whissen takes this to an extreme by suggesting that 'cult books are literary accidents ... and attempts to deliberately write one are doomed to fail' (Whissen, 1992, p94). This makes a certain amount of sense: it could be argued that Barthes' theory of the 'death of the author' fits in with the idea that cult fiction is out with the conscious control of its creator. It could be argued that the refusal of a bourgeois realist reading is vital to cult for it locates 'meaning' in the novel's intertextual features; in other words, a cult reading is a *symptomatic* one. While I

¹⁴ 'Vietnam was a lucky coincidence ... there was a change in spirit, a new spirit of healthy irreverence. There was a general feeling that the platitudes of Americanism were horseshit ... The phrase "Catch-22" began appearing more and more frequently in a wide range of contexts. I began hearing from people who believed that I'd named the book after the phrase' (Heller, 2003, p 315).

accept that it is difficult to 'produce' a cult novel, I agree with Umberto Eco when he posits in *Faith in Fakes* (1985) that there are cult hits that influence and 'control' the specialised tastes of cult audiences. In other words, there are works that self-consciously court cult status and *assume* the addressee's intertextual frame of cult reference. 'What *Casablanca* does unconsciously, other movies will do with extreme intertextual awareness,' (Eco, 1985, p198). As Andrew Calcutt in *Cult Fiction* states, it may be that it is the 'readers not writers [who] put the cult into cult fiction' (Calcutt, 1998, pxiv), but it is this 'same degree of power, and making just the sort of decision that advertisers would die to be able to control – a consumer choice as definite as the decision to switch toothpastes – the cult viewer makes his or her product preference known' (Telotte, 1991, p8) that has, in this late stage of capitalism, made cult fiction ripe for cultural commodification. I will look at this aspect later in a discussion of Irvine Welsh, but for the time being it would be helpful to focus on the powerful readings made on a particular text.

As a measure of how independent these readings of the cult text are can be is demonstrated by the way authors often object and distance themselves from the cultist's interpretation of the book. Hesse was upset at the interpretations of *Steppenwolf*. Salinger was perturbed at the reaction to *The Catcher in the Rye*. Closer to our time, Alan Warner also registered his complaints about the reading

of *Morvern Callar*.¹⁵ Goethe was concerned about the *Wertherfieber*, the extreme cult fan base that grew up around the book,¹⁶ to the extent that in later editions he edited passages out – 'I'm heartily tired of having poor Werther exhumed and dissected,' he says in a letter dated 6 March 1775. It is significant that of all the writers studied in this thesis, Irvine Welsh is perhaps the only one to have successfully cajoled the reader into making cult identification with the novel, for reasons I will explore later.

In *Goethe's Novels* (1969), Hans Reiss in concedes to the power of the reader's interpretation over the author's intention – 'Those who saw in Werther an appeal for the liberation from the yoke of an intolerable rationality, from the control of religious, intellectual and social traditions, read the novel in a one-sided manner. They admired Werther instead of pitying him' (Reiss, 1969, p52) – though not a scholar of cult, he touches on the core of cult interpretation. His 'one-sided' reading reminds us of the symbiotic interaction, that 'deep' connection that a cult

¹⁵ 'My first novel *Morvern Callar* came to be looked on by some people as a sort of lifestyle tract in nightclub culture. Rather chillingly, a mate told me that on some Internet chat site the other day he "met" a young American girl who claimed she "based her life on *Morvern Callar*". It always seemed to me that my treatment of the so-called "rave culture", especially in *These Demented Lands* was pretty cynical. I think there is a clear mocking of the ephemerality of it', see Welsh, Doyle and Warner, 'Rhythm and prose', *The Herald*, 20.02.2000

¹⁶ In the Penguin edition of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Micheal Hulse describes the cult of Werther that grew up in Europe after its publication '[a] young woman drowned herself in the river Ilm behind Goethe's garden in Weimar . . . [she] had been deserted by her lover, and went to her death with a copy of Werther in her pocket' (Goethe, 1989, p12). Interestingly Hulse provides another slant on 'Romantic agony', when he refers to the book's 'maudlin indulgences'.

reader has with the text which is not present in a more conventional reading, or a 'sound reading of the novel', one that 'involves a wider view. Both the vitalizing [sic] and destructive forces of feeling must be recognised. Emotion is necessary, but it must not step beyond its limits' (Reiss, 1969, p54). Reiss highlights an important aspect here, that cult reading is concerned first and foremost with sensibility rather than rationality. Note his warning, rather like an adult warning a child not to let their emotions overstep the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

Culting classics

I'd like to look in more detail at cult reading habits. If a cult book's meaning is 'outside the conscious control of its creators' (Eco, 1985, p199), then this has significant ramifications for the literary establishment and academics who place great emphasis on the skill and intention of the author. If cult exists because, as Telotte states, 'many seem to become cult works largely because their audience – their potential lovers – *cannot* be accurately assessed through conventional wisdom' (Telotte, 1991, p 8), then surely it promotes some kind of literary anarchy where the pillars of established thinking are destroyed. If, as Umberto Eco suggests in *Faith in Fakes* (1985), a successful cult book 'does not reveal a coherent philosophy of composition. It must live on, and because of, its glorious ricketyness', yet it can share a canon with a great work of art – 'curiously enough,

a book can also inspire a cult even though it is a great work: both *The Three Musketeers* and *The Divine Comedy* rank among cult books' (Eco, 1985, p 198) – then surely this mounts a serious challenge to the academic concern with form and to the evaluative power of the intellectual. It is in mounting this challenge that cult fiction retains some of its radical force. Andrew Calcutt argues that 'cult fiction offers an alternative and radical path to the recognised canon of high literature' (Calcutt, 1998, p ix), while Clive Bloom thinks it is radical in that it upsets hitherto concrete notions of what constitutes 'high' and 'low' culture, in this sense, cult is a 'moveable feast' that approaches the kind of literary subversiveness that could challenge the dominant bourgeois elite, the 'anarchic, uncontrollable . . . cult status (a challenge to the ruling oligarchy)' (Bloom, 1996, p ix).

By positing a text that does not reveal a coherent philosophy of composition, Eco opens the way to see that books, which are not considered great art, have equal footing with ones that do. Thus novels with little 'artistic' merit can become cult classics. The cult 'canon' might include Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* (1966)¹⁷ as well as works of literature that are generally regarded as 'great', such as Goethe's *Werther* for instance. This represents, as Andrew Ross posits, a challenge because popular taste, "Vulgar taste" ("I know *what* I like" –

¹⁷ Paul Burston noted on re-publication of Susann's enduring book that it is 'a cult curiosity, imitated by drag queens and quoted by an ever diminishing circle of camp aficionados' ('Novels on Pink Paper', *Independent on Sunday*, 24/05/98).

thoughtless pleasure) disrespectfully *refuses* the labour of education and the hard school of acquiring cultural competence' (Ross, 1989, p20). Put another way: cult fiction's reading strategies align with Pierre Bourdieu's comment that "the easiest, and so the most frequent and most spectacular way to "shock the bourgeois" ... is by conferring aesthetic status on objects or ways of representing them that are excluded by the dominant aesthetic of the time' (Bourdieu, 1989, p47).

One way in which this type of fiction shocks the bourgeois is by conferring classic status on a cult book. If indeed a cult reading is a revisionist one then surely critics' propensity to refer to a 'cult classic' appears tautological. Our understanding of a classic is informed by TS Eliot's influential essay 'What is a Classic?' (1945). A classic, in Eliot's understanding, requires a positive notion of history – 'it is only by hindsight, and in historical perspective, that a classic can be known as such' (Eliot, 1975, p116) – for without this 'classical standard' we are left with provincialism. In Eliot's critique, the 'present' condition or evaluation of literature is shaped through the kaleidoscope of a past – and inherently superior – age. For Eliot, if an artefact that does not show a 'coherent philosophy of composition' (Eco), if we give 'the second-rate equal rank with the first-rate' (Eliot, 1975, p129), then it can never be deemed a classic. For Eliot, progressive, teleological narratives of history inform the often anarchistic, contemporaneous moment; so too, the appropriation of a classic today can only be done by a

society, and an author, that has reached a maturity from the understanding of history: 'A classic can only occur when a civilisation is mature ... and it must be the work of a mature mind' (Eliot, 1975, p116). What is interesting about Eliot's notion of a mature society is the positioning of the *intellectual* in its front ranks as a one who can determine such integral sophistication. Eliot judges a classic on its internal formal qualities such as language and style. Instead of asking the broader sociological question of how books function in the society in which it is placed, in other words, instead of looking at how it is read by generations, Eliot focuses on how it is written. As already explained this section is not interested in privileging the role of writer or artist. But we have already established that a cult book isn't necessarily a great work of art, so how can we use the term classic?

In his 'Why Read the Classics?' included in *The Literature Machine* (1987), Italo Calvino suggests that 'we do not read the classics out of duty or respect, only out of love'. This notion of love of the classic is similar to the emotional response that a reader brings to the cult book. Contrary to Eliot, Calvino suggests that the appropriation of a classic does not necessarily involve a positive notion of history but a certain amount of revisionism. The classics, Calvino states:

are books that exert a peculiar influence, both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious. There should

therefore be a time in adult life devoted to revisiting the most important books of our youth. Even if the books have remained the same (though they do change, in the light of an altered historical perspective), we have most certainly changed, and our encounter will be an entirely new thing (Calvino, 1987, p127).

The shift in emphasis from Eliot to Calvino is also a movement from an insistence on form to the book's reception. A classic for Calvino is actually an *escape* from 'maturity' into a world where the historical dimension does not shape the present, but facilitates a *flight* from it. History is no longer seen as a totalising narrative and the return to literature of the past is not, as the modernists would have it, to inform the present, but it is to revel in nostalgia – a sensibility – and exhibit a very dubious trans-historical attitude. Or as Coupland might suggest, they revel in historical slumming, as in the case with cult readerships. Whereas Eliot might have made the present more bearable, the nostalgic desire to return to the past suggests, as Lyotard does, that the metanarrative of history can no longer consolidate. Calvino's classic provides a perfect model for its close cousin: as with cult his classic involves a 'deeper' reading than a more conventional one¹⁸ and they form esoteric readerships: 'Dickens fans in Italy form a tiny elite; as soon as its members meet, they begin to chatter about characters and episodes

¹⁸ 'At every opportunity he comes up with some quip from Dickens's book, and connects each and every event in life with some Pickwickian episode . . . a process of complete identification' (Calvino, 1986, p 129).

as if they were discussing people and things of their own acquaintance' (Calvino, 1987, p 128). In other words, the classic not only shares the same cultural revisionism as cult but it is involved in the same *jouissance* or play with the signifiers from different contexts and cultures. The fans of Dickens play games and complete their reading of the text by doing so, just as fans of the cult book justify its sacred mysteries. It is at this point that we can perceive Eliot's historical imperative as cold and detached and that a cult audience's revisionism, on the contrary, is in favour of a 'communal memory which is different from "history" and which is shot through with an affection history does not feel' (Bloom, 1996, p. 6). Again we must note that the retreat from history implies an 'affection'.

Dangerous minds

We have established that a cult reading is a powerful reading, one that often challenges conventional ideas about interpretation, one that gives its followers a 'mirror'. So what are the characteristics that distinguish cult-reading strategies from more conventional ones? Why do cult readers perform such flagrantly symbiotic readings? Why do they respond with such emotion? In *Classic Cult Fiction* Thomas Whissen suggests that the cult moment occurs when the identity of novel's hero fuses with that of the 'vulnerable' reader. This, the critic suggests, happens when there are constituent parts present: 'Certain psychological components must be present, in full or part, before a book can inspire a cult and

qualify for the label of cult fiction. These psychological components include such things as idealisation, alienation, ego-reinforcement, suffering, behaviour modification and vulnerability' (Whissen, 1992, pxxiv).

In almost every cult book discussed the protagonists live in some form of exile or alienation. From Coupland's Andy, Dag and Claire (the Generation Xers) to the likes of Werther, Caulfield and Haller, in almost every instance this alienation is self-conscious and self-imposed; invariably, these heroes have made the decision to be on the outside, on the periphery, to be 'foreigners'. These are the type of characters that appeal, as Thomas Whissen argues, to readers who 'secretly prefer alienation, taking curious comfort in the knowledge that they are not alone in their loneliness (Whissen, 1992, xxviii) – and all cultists buy into the axiom: 'He travels furthest who travels alone'. This is why the metaphor of the tourist is crucial to cult fiction. Cult heroes – protagonists or authors – are on a Don Quixote-type journey of discovery and, without exception, their solitary state is exacerbated by the fact that they experience foreignness in a once-familiar territory. All cult heroes have a little of Benny Profane in them, 'alone in the street, it would always seem maybe he was looking for something too to make the fact of his own disassembly plausible' (Pynchon, V, p40). This is not a new image, we've seen it before with the flaneur, and it is a constituent part of our understanding of modernity. Commenting on cult consumption, Telotte hints at the deeper, more symbiotic reading that cultists perform: 'a special sort of

appropriation, a kind of souvenir gathering, as the viewer takes something from this public encounter back to his or her private life and thereby enriches it' (Telotte, 1991, p3). Telotte's souvenir, as its component 'venir' suggests, generates a narrative that reaches 'behind' the present: it is regressive and revisionist.

But there is a certain paradox here, as all cultists wish to be 'part' of some kind of group, some sect with a 'voice' that forges its identity through not wanting – or more specifically not being able to – be part of a group. Cultists have a rather strange sense of alienation. Most are not really disenfranchised or cast aside by society like genuine minority groups such as asylum-seekers. On the contrary, they *choose* to be alienated, which is a topic I will discuss when I study Ginsberg. As Whissen suggests: 'Sometimes the cry seems shrill and the protest excessive, making one wonder how much of this appetite for alienation is not after all just another version of our eternal impishness, our resistance to conformity ... our wish to be anything but anonymous' (Whissen, 1992, p xxx). Thus cult fiction expresses the somewhat naïve hankering of the alienated to be taken into the fold; it explores the longing to conform to the responsibilities of adult life: it is an adolescent's last cry before coming of age.

Another strong theme that is closely related is suffering. The cult heroes discussed have an almost pathological – not to mention sadomasochistic –

propensity to delight in suffering. We have already seen how the Romantics displayed this (especially evident in Shelley's 'solace of a disappointment that unconsciously finds relief only in the wilful exaggeration of its own despair'). For cult heroes the propensity to suffer is directly proportionate their status. 'If they fancy themselves as artists, they embrace the loneliness of the gifted and the burden of genius. And if they go unrecognised, then what greater pleasure than the sweet agony of failure itself? If one cannot be a success at anything else, the point is to be a success at suffering' (Whissen, 1992, pxxxiii). This is the exact quality that the 'Preface' to *Steppenwolf* praises: 'A nature such as Nietzsche's had to suffer our present ills more than a generation in advance. What he had to go through alone and misunderstood, thousands suffer today' (Hesse, 1965, p28).

One doesn't need to be a health professional to establish that someone at once alienated and suffering is also vulnerable and susceptible. A reaction to the book as I have already intimated and as I will expand upon at a later stage, is a spontaneous and emotional response that, for a period of time, bypasses any kind of rational thought – it is emotion that has stepped beyond its limits. As Whissen states: 'If, for example, a young man just discovering his darker impulses and feeling guilty about them should stumble across Hesse's *Demian*, he might find Max Demain's exaltation of his dark side a seductive way out of a

moral dilemma' (Whissen, 1992, pxxxv). What this points to is that a relationship between vulnerable reader and the naïf is dependent on *idealisation*.

In contemporary psychology, idealisation is based on a need to see only certain aspects of a person and not the other; in other words, about seeing someone as perfect while ignoring their imperfections. Idealisation has a strong association with childhood, as children often idealise parents in order to avoid the anxiety and chaos of abandonment, abuse or neglect. The idealised image of parents can be used to shield them from the reality of their problematic upbringing: it is often utilised as protection from emotional pain and uncertainty. This argument certainly carries weight – especially if we remember that religious cults often recruit on the basis of the breakdown of the family structure. If 'the family no longer provides the avenues through which it is possible to attain social maturity' then many adolescents may lack direction and discipline, which 'allows them to postpone the ensuing responsibilities of adulthood ... to explore new, alternative expressions of identity' (Thomas, Gecas, Weigert and Rooney, 1974, p111). These alternative expressions of identity are formed by idealising out with the family socialisation mechanism and often in new religious movements, in the hippie family of the counterculture, and, as I hope to show here, within the world of cult readerships.

This is what Ian Hamilton had to say about his experience of *The Catcher in the Rye*. In terms of cult fiction the reader's strong identification with and idealisation of the naïf character is closely related to the way followers relate to the charismatic cult leader. This is an extremely important point, as it takes us nearer to the similarities between religious and literary cults.

I remember that for many months after reading *The Catcher* at the age of seventeen, I went around being Holden Caulfield. I carried his book everywhere with me as a kind of talisman. It seemed to me funnier, more touching, and more *right* about the way things were than anything else I'd ever read. I would persuade prospective friends, especially girls, to read it as a test: if they didn't like it, 'get' it, they were out. But if they did, then somehow a foundation seemed to have been laid: Here was someone I could 'really talk to' (Hamilton, 1998, p5)

There is little doubt that Hamilton is making the strongest possible identification with the hero of the novel: 'testing' potential friends (and Salinger cult members) against the gospel of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Like the press release featuring Ian Rankin, who urges cultists not just to read but to 'gulp' down Don Winslow's novel, Hamilton's primacy of 'talisman' over book suggests we are dealing with a greater sense of involvement than is at play in conventional reading practices. Talisman suggests something with magical power. But more than this, the

quotation could have been lifted straight from the testimony of a typical religious cult member. If we substituted 'Holden Caulfield' for L Ron Hubbard and *The Catcher in the Rye* for *Dianetics* then we'd never know the difference.¹⁹ This quotation is very illuminating. Not only does it highlight Hamilton's complete idealisation of Caulfield but it points to a 'brainwashing' mentality that is very common in the religious counterparts.

Studies have shown that victims of brainwashing experience a near complete cognitive, emotional and social breakdown through a complex system of psychological and physical 'torture', two of which, 'sensory deprivation' and 'sensory overload', are of particular importance here. In relation to religious cults the act of purposely cutting someone off from 'normal' society is 'an extremely effective way of bringing about at least temporary behavioural reform', and when this happens 'people lose their sense of reality and their sense of self' (Dawson, 1998, p 107). Hamilton here highlights that he has temporarily lost both; but more importantly, this gives us a unique insight into the workings of the cult readerships: they have, as I have argued, cut themselves off from normal reading strategies – are depriving themselves of more conventional interpretations of the text. In religious cults when this 'behavioural reform' happens the first thing to leave the cultist is self-confidence, and, as a result, 'this makes you more open to

¹⁹ Compare and contrast Hamilton's observation with a customer's review of *Dianetics* on amazon.co.uk: 'Well, when I first read this book, quite a number of years ago, I can honestly report that it blew my socks off! Almost immediately I went to the Church of Scientology ... and signed up.'

suggestion and also more dependent on the environment for cues about “right” thinking and “right” conduct. Your resistance to new ideas lessens’ (Singer, 1995, p 75). Note the lack of self-confidence in Hamilton’s excerpt – especially when it comes to the opposite sex. The implication is that *The Catcher in the Rye* will help him overcome the adolescent awkwardness of talking to girls and that in order to *really talk* to someone they must undergo some kind of vetting to establish if they have read the book. But also implicit in this extract is another established technique religious cults use to recruit members.

Studies into religious cults have shown that recruiters ‘target and approach likely candidates for conversion ... [and] look for evidence that the person is alone, in a period of transition in life, or otherwise “vulnerable” in some way’ (Dawson, 1998, p 107). This is exactly what Hamilton is doing; searching for likeminded individuals in a period of transition – here it is from child to adult – and the use of the term vulnerable takes us full circle. This is how literary cults grow.

I remember one guy saying: ‘See those smokestacks? What do they remind you of? Have you ever considered how they look like gigantic burning incense sticks? Well look at this. It says in Jeremiah, the Prophet who was sent to Israel to warn them of God’s coming judgement on their nation, like He’s doing today, calling the so-called Christian churches ... to repentance for their spiritual adultery, it says: “And they burned incense unto other gods, and filled the face of the earth with their idols, the

creations of their own imaginations, and forsook Me, their Creator and Redeemer.” Heavy, huh!’ And I said: ‘Wow! Yeah! I had no idea!’ And they’d say: ‘Neither did we. None of us ever learned that in Sunday School’²⁰

As I have already stated, part of the experience of cult fiction is that authors often object to embellished and erroneous interpretations of their work. I’ve suggested how this extreme reader response, this ‘one-sided’ reading, as Reiss would have it, could contribute to cult fiction’s radical reputation, especially within academic circles. If traditional rules of interpretation are skewed by *mis*interpretation then this presents a challenge on the same level as the breakdown of high and low boundaries. There is undoubtedly a kernel of truth in this but I don’t think it even begins to adequately describe the phenomenon: cult reading is working on so many other levels, not least on an emotional one, and one that often defies logical thinking. It is when a person brings excess emotional baggage to his reading, it is when, Hans Reiss might argue, the interaction with the text steps ‘beyond its limits’ that we enter the dangerous realm of the cult reading. Think about the person who wishes to base her life on the character of Morvern Callar. What sort of emotional factors are persuading her to perform this symbiotic reading (she is almost certainly not thinking about a radical gesture in defiance of

²⁰ Taken from the testimony of ‘Rick’ an ex-cult member who was involved in an abusive religious movement. For full testimony and other observations on post-cult trauma see <http://nwrain.net/~refocus/>.

the academy)? I propose to look at this particular question and by doing so hope to attain a better understanding of what a cult reader does when he interacts with the text. I would also like to build a psychological profile of Mark Chapman, whose assassination of John Lennon is, perhaps, the most profound example of a cult reading that exists.

So what might this 'emotional baggage' contain? What are these psychological traits Whissen is keen to attribute to the act of cult reading? To answer these questions I want to first look at the notion of the negative ego. A person's negative ego has the propensity to think only in terms of itself and it manifests in a form of selfishness that refuses to take into consideration other crucial external factors. Essentially, the negative ego is the absence of true knowledge of our identity: fittingly the Tibetan word for ego is called 'dakdzi', which means 'grasping to a self'. The negative ego operates solely out of selfishness, isolation, fear, and fragmentation. Without proper parenting, it is often the place from which the 'inner' child is operating. In its developmental stage, most commonly associated with childhood, the ego tends to be at its most rudimentary. But as the subject learns through a complex combination of positive parental support – praise, positive appraisals and interaction with other individuals and organisations – and life experiences greater self-awareness occurs and the ego develops and contributes to adolescent and adult self-esteem. We can see an example of this in the way Hamilton uses Salinger's novel to vet possible

(girl)friends: his sense of self is so undeveloped (we are never told why that might be) that he using a novel rather than his own intelligence to test others. Note his air of selfishness – everything is concerned with how it affects him.

Warner's complaint about *Morvern Callar's* American reader is another prime example: she has not thought about the wider external factors, that the book might actually be cynically mocking the 'ephemerality' of the very thing she is ascribing immutable qualities to – a 'rave-culture' from which she is drawing possible far-reaching conclusions about her identity. It is clear that her desire to idealise the book's heroine is far outweighing any rational reading that others might perform on it. Unfortunately we do not know much else about Morvern Callar's reader, so speculation as to why she might be making this kind of identification is not available. But we can still achieve this by looking at Mark Chapman.

If factors conspire to upset this developmental stage – childhood traumas, family break-up – then this can often result in a stunted ego development. This is the type of person Whissen has in mind when he talks of the 'vulnerable' in his assessment of cult readers. Significantly, it is also this kind of person that religious cults hope to recruit. Historians and sociologists argue that in these more advanced industrial societies the family unit is far more nurturing than in previous eras. In the affluent 1960s, children were living longer than at any time

in history and there was much more attention paid to their emotional, psychological and educational support.²¹ The nuclear family, as opposed to traditional socialising mechanisms such as extended families, stable neighbourhoods (or 'community'), and, most importantly, the church, now provided the primary source of a child's development. But abandoning those 'mediating structures', which in theory had helped an adolescent's coming-of-age transition from the family network and into adult institutions such as the workplace, which was quickly becoming ruthlessly capitalistic, created its own problems. Young adults were not properly equipped to deal with the large corporate environment – in other words there was less scope for mediating into a new social reality, and there was a real identity crisis among the youth. New religious movements, or cults, provided a solution by proposing to help facilitate a transition. Movements such as Children of God or Scientology not only promoted devotion to a new religious creed but also encouraged their followers to perform well in corporate workplace in the name of the 'spiritual family'. Charismatic cult leaders, such as Reverend Moon, often assume the role of parent. Dangerous

²¹ New religious movements were a response to unprecedented cultural change in western societies in a climate of post-war affluence, the great social and political changes brought by 'modernisation', such as unprecedented growth and spread in affluence, greater levels of education and, to a lesser extent, a huge rise in birth rates, or the 'baby boom'. By the beginning of the 1960s, the so-called 'generation gap' between the boomers and their authoritarian progenitors was exacerbated by new cultural developments – such as a more permissive and liberal attitude to sex, alternative living arrangements (communes and cohabitation) that 'chipped' away at such institutions as marriage, fashion and popular music – and great technological advances, mass communications, for example, beamed the likes of civil rights demonstrations, student protests and the horrors of a conflict in Vietnam.

religious groups seek out and attempt to maintain this stasis in the development of a member's ego – usually hidden in with the phrase 'born again' – as it often ensures the longevity of membership of the group. They do this by using such techniques as 'sensory deprivation', a way of denying members interaction with the outside world, false praise and overblown appraisals; in other words, exactly the opposite of what is needed if a child is to grow up mentally stable. In his testimony of post-cult trauma, religious post-cult trauma victim Rick tells of a song they were forced to sing in which initiates assumed a child-like subservience to the leader.²²

Cult heroes and readers – the naifs and the vulnerable – conspire in a kind of adolescent alchemy and in the act of interpretation the reader's underdeveloped ego makes a tremendous leap of faith. But this vulnerability often creates the problem of gross misreading. Whissen characterises it thus: 'Vulnerability becomes sheer gullibility, an eagerness to accept blindly and without question what the book is saying – or what the reader *thinks* the book is saying' (Whissen, 1992, p xxxv). Compare this with the way Rick is 'persuaded' to see how the smokestacks resemble gigantic burning incense sticks in order to extract an idiosyncratic and esoteric interpretation of *Jeremiah*. Look at the gulf between what the book in the Bible is actually saying and what he is being encouraged to

²² 'Except a man be converted/And become as a child/He cannot enter ... Except a man be born again/ He cannot enter/Into the Kingdom – Jesus said ... [chorus] You gotta be a baby/You gotta be a baby/You gotta be a baby/To go to heaven - Jesus said/You gotta be a baby/You gotta be a baby/You gotta be a baby/To go to hea-ven'

think the book is saying. Rick's vulnerability – 'They convinced me from scripture that time was short, and that whatever plans I had made, whatever dreams I had for the rest of my life were futile in light of the fact that the world might end within my lifetime' – and the shameless appeal to his ego – 'They would sing to me ... somehow they'd put my name into the lyrics. And they wouldn't just sing "to" me, they sang "about" me' – is soon turned into blinding gullibility: 'Wow! Yeah! I had no idea!' In many ways, Rick's reading is no different from that of *Morvern Callar's* American fan: though one is mocking ephemerality and the other is playing on it, in both cases a gross misinterpretation has taken place. It's no exaggeration to use terms such as gross and extreme in this context, and a discussion of Mark Chapman will further reinforce the point.

Double Fantasy

It was well documented at the time of the incident and is still today widely accepted that John Lennon's assassin was deeply motivated by *The Catcher in the Rye*. This is not a strictly accurate assessment and by refuting it I wish to show where the fatal extremes that a misreading of a text can lead. Chapman's obsession with the novel was particularly unhealthy, but to say it was the book's message that started a fatal chain of events is critically imprecise, for his interaction with it was only marginally more serious than that of the reader of *Morvern Callar*. What is most significant – yet most overlooked – is that

Chapman actually misinterprets the inner thoughts and actions of Caulfield, who in turn has grossly *misinterpreted* a line from a Robert Burns poem. This is absolutely crucial. It is a misreading of a misreading – the real message of the book is there for those who have the acuity to see it, namely readers who perform a conventional reading (that is not 'one-sided') on it – and one in which all positive formations of the ego, in the fictional and real-life characters, were fatally missing.

Reading the early part of Salinger's novel, the confessional tone of Caulfield's narrative gives the reader the impression that he has undergone some kind of journey in which he has learnt valuable lessons. He has more grey hair now than when he started his journey, suggesting he has gained some experience from his ordeal. He even imparts a little nugget of wisdom that every teenager will instantly understand: 'I get sometimes bored when people tell me to act my age. Sometimes I act a lot older than I am – I really do – but people never notice it. People never notice anything' (Salinger, 1994, p8). The frank tone is charismatic and appeals to the archetypal teenager who feels alienated and just can't grow up quick enough. Just as *Catch-22* managed to sum up a countercultural movement pitted against the war in Vietnam, Caulfield's performance encapsulates the feeling of *ennui* that the American youth was experiencing in the mid-1960s: 'I can't seem to get very interested in [the Egyptians] although your lectures are very interesting. It is all right with me if you flunk me though as I

am flunking everything else except English anyway' (Salinger, 1994, p10).

Caulfield's acute sense of exclusion – 'It wasn't allowed for students to borrow faculty guys' cars, but all the athletic bastards stuck together. In every school I've gone to, all the athletic bastards stick together' (Salinger, 1994, p37) – from the 'normal' society of Joe Yale-looking guys and the phonies, is counterbalanced with his search for identity. Just as Rick turns to a religious cult for some answers to his life problems, so too does the vulnerable Caulfield – we gradually realise that his family have not been as nurturing as we might expect such a respectable middle-class family to be – think about joining a monastery (1994, p44).

Furthermore, he even distinguishes between books that are enjoyable and ones that go beyond conventional reading: ones that 'you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it' (Salinger, 1994, p37). In other words, he differentiates between conventional authors and cult authors. Like all adolescents he is unsure about sexual intimacy (something that Hamilton picks up on) but his brash tone when he is referring to girls hides a fear that the reader feels will be overcome as the narrator matures as he says he has.

Caulfield's frank narrative lulls the reader into thinking that by the end of his journey there will be a didactic outcome, a moral message will be imparted that might prove insightful in our day-to-day lives, thus rewarding the finishing of the novel. But toward the end of the novel a major doubt is cast on the validity of the

confession that has gone before, that Caulfield's journey of self-discovery has been based on a falsehood and that he has learnt nothing. We are first alerted to this when we realise he has misread a line from a Burns poem. Caulfield makes it known he is on a journey, but the reasons for that journey remain unclear – to him and the reader. It is at the very moment that we discover the rationale behind his wandering – that he wants to be the catcher in the rye – that Phoebe alerts him to his misreading: "It's 'If a body *meet* a body coming through the rye'!". This is the crux of the novel. It is the time when Caulfield should pause to reflect, when the folly of his journey should be made known to him. It is also the point in which cult readers are separated from conventional readers. It is also the time when some readers begin to question what has gone before. But Caulfield does no such thing. The young man continues: 'I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff' (Salinger, 1994, p156). Caulfield brings his own undeveloped self, his negative ego, to the reading of the poem. He makes a gross leap from what the line says and what he wants it to say.

What this episode conveys is that he has learnt nothing from his ordeal, that he has failed to interpret the signals, as Mr Antolini lucidly paints in the next chapter. Mr Antolini states, in a fatherly tone, that Caulfield need not be heading for 'a special kind of fall, a horrible kind' (Salinger, 1994, p155) and that he might begin to come to terms with his problems if he starts looking closely at the events he has just described to the reader: 'you're going to start getting closer and closer –

that is, if you *want* to, and if you look for it and wait for it – to the kind of information that will be very, very dear to your heart. Among other things, you'll find that you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behaviour. You're by no means alone on that score ... many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now' (Salinger, 1994, p170).

Though the veracity of Mr Antolini's sentiments is seriously called into question after he makes a sexual pass at Caulfield, he does make a very valid point that can be extended to all cult heroes – you need not have that special kind of fall. But it falls on deaf ears. Caulfield takes none of these messages on board and his journey has been a waste of time. Caulfield wants to revel in his suffering (when, with child-like verve, he pretends to have taken a bullet in the 'guts' after a pimp takes money from him, 1994, p93) and it becomes clear that, as Mr Antolini suggests, he just didn't *want* to read the signs. In other words he wants to be a 'success at suffering'. Caulfield is not the first to feel this alienated, but there is a childish stubbornness in his insistence that he is the most tortured soul ever. This notion of childish stubbornness is crucial to cult fiction for most heroes, they think they know better and often suffer unnecessarily. All cult heroes are rebellious teenagers. His misreading of Burns is a sign of how he is misreading the signs in his life. This is made perfectly clear in the last chapter. Caulfield is speaking with a psychotherapist and it is obvious that he is still confused: 'I mean

how do you know what you're going to do till you *do* it? The answer is, you don't. I *think* I am, but how do I know?' (Salinger, 1994, p192). Then: 'If you want to know the truth, he says, mimicking his frank tone of the early part of the novel he begins, 'I'm sorry I told so many people about it.' (Salinger, 1994, p192). Salinger is deliberately ambiguous here: does this mean Caulfield is concerned that he has been spreading a false message or does this have more of a narcissistic connotation? I believe it is the latter as it fits in with the idea of the ego, the self, not learning, not developing. He learns later what he should have realised all along – as the reader has done – that he didn't have to be a martyr to the cause 'all I know is, I sort of *miss* everybody I told about' (Salinger, 1994, p192). But even here his tone – in italics – is unconvincing and the moral message he imparts is insincere even phoney: 'Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody' (Salinger, 1994, p192).

Whissen states that in conventional reading when we identify with a character we learn 'educated humility' by sharing the author's or character's motives and how they reflect on our common humanity, and, as a result, our 'self-image has been chastened through self-honesty'. A cult book, however, 'short-circuits' this and readers' 'pride and ego emerge unscathed' (Whissen, 1992, p xxxi). As a misreader of Burns, Caulfield has not developed any understanding of his self, in other words his ego, and those who want to read into the story a narrative of alienation and suffering are permitted to do so. One reader who did just that is

Mark Chapman. In his biography *Let Me Take You Down* (1992), Jack Jones portrays Chapman as an extremely vulnerable young man. Following a relatively comfortable childhood, his family security began to breakdown after his father became increasingly abusive and violent. By the age of 18, Chapman was beginning to read his early experiences through the eyes of Caulfield.²³ His rebellious adolescence involving excessive psychedelic drug abuse (Jones, 1992, p126), an increased interest in alternative religions (p141) and his alienation were the 'smokestacks' that led him to the gospel of Caulfield. Chapman went on to display rather ominous psychological traits: erratic behaviour that included a botched suicide attempt (calling to mind Goethe's Werther) and a troubling propensity to turn inward to what he called the 'Little People' for emotional support. The extent of Chapman's imaginary friends demonstrates a dangerous insularity and lack of interaction with others, and it also shows the extent of his damaged and deficient ego.²⁴ As Chapman said: 'Normal kids don't grow up to shoot ex-Beatles' (Jones, 1992, p117). He might have added that is 'because normal kids grow up'.

It was at a Chapel Woods Presbyterian Church retreat in 1970 that he was

²³ 'I started to feel alienated. Other kids teased me, and I didn't seem to be able to defend myself against them. I wasn't very athletic, and I began to think of myself as inferior' (Jones, 1992, p 116)

²⁴ 'I got my respect and adulation from an imaginary source, rather than confronting the kids and the things that hurt me and earning it on my own ... I would take it out on the Little People. Sometimes if somebody had hurt me at school or I was angry at my father, I would get revenge by killing some of the little people. (Jones, 1992, p 116)

reintroduced to Salinger's novel. It's obvious that the vulnerable Chapman read very deeply into the character of Caulfield. Whereas Caulfield fails to see the wisdom of Mr Antolini's words, Chapman does the opposite: he 'wants' too much to read the signs and 'looks' too deeply into the skewed message Holden is imparting. Instead of performing a sound reading of the novel (to paraphrase Hans Reiss), instead of taking the novel's moral message – you need not be heading for 'a special kind of fall' and that you are not alone or different from many other teenagers experiencing trouble in today's society – Chapman identifies with Caulfield's mad, bad and dangerous, or in his narrator's own words 'crazy', romantic insistence on being the catcher and his heroic fight against the phonies, even though it is a doomed project. Chapman has failed to read the book's actual meaning, has failed to perform the kind of reading that Reiss stresses for *Werther*, instead his interpretation 'goes beyond its limits' and he performs a cult reading on Caulfield's distorted and prejudiced take on the line from Burns:

It was a little kid that did that act of killing John Lennon. A little kid on his Don Quixote horse went charging up to a windmill called the Dakota [the singer's apartment building] with an insane, irreparable, tragic mission: to put holes through one of the sails of that windmill of phoniness (Jones, 1992, p 51).

Chapman's identification with the Quixotic struggle is highly illuminating in this context: it signifies that the quest is heroic while being ultimately futile from the beginning and instead of learning humility or a life lesson – as Mr Antolini quotes: “The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he want to live humbly for one” (Jones, 1992, p169) (a lesson that Don Quixote cruelly learns). As Whissen points out: those who ‘ultimately identify with Holden’s neurosis, convinced that it is they who are sick and out-of-step [feel] there is no place for them in this world’ (Whissen, 1992, p52).

Psychologist Jay Martin in *Who Am I This Time? Uncovering the Fictive Personality* (1998), speaks of the ‘ego nuclei’ theory, which posits that if the various strands of the ego are not unified in the developmental stage (if they remain nuclei) then, ‘the self experiences itself from outside, and these fragments seem to be autonomous and to lead to a separate existence inside one’s personality’ (Martin, 1988, p38). When this happens, Martin argues, the subject ‘who feel[s] diffuse, fragmented, and unstable may find rigid guidelines and premeditated shapes in fictions’ (Martin, 1988, p24). Chapman was more than willing wholeheartedly to adopt and embrace the fictional character of Caulfield to the fullest. Jones tells us that he had signed a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*: ‘From Holden Caulfield to Holden Caulfield’ (Jones, 1992, p218) and Martin relates how he even enquired about changing his name to that of the fictional

hero (Martin, 1988, p40). What is particularly striking about Chapman's cult reading of *The Catcher in the Rye* is that it was not his first encounter with the novel. He had read it in early youth and he professed to have enjoyed it yet not to have performed such a symbiotic reading of it.²⁵ This is important for two reasons. Firstly, it takes us back to Calvino and his notion of a classic that is deemed to be so in the act of revisiting the text years later. Secondly, it shows that something happened in between both readings. Most notably in the interim Chapman experiences a breakdown – 'There is a tornado in my mind, circling around my brain, bits and pieces crashing into the walls. A debris. Broken things. Cloudy things' (Jones, 1992, p216) – that persuades him to adopt the fictive personality of Caulfield, so that 'I actually became Holden Caulfield in my own mind, as a way of coping. So that book became for me an imaginary anchor in the midst of a real cyclone' (Jones, 1992, p216).

What the book second time around symbolises to Chapman is his attempt to right the wrongs of his childhood and adolescence, to repair his fractured ego damaged when he was so young and vulnerable: 'I used the word *phony* because I was at the beginning infancy of *being* The Catcher in the Rye' (Jones, 1992, p216). For Chapman, the fictive character of Caulfield becomes a terrible reality. But what is vitally important to establish is that Caulfield is a fictional character who responds, as I have established, to an illusory reality, which is

²⁵ He first read the book at about the same age that Holden Caulfield was ... I don't believe I identified with it a great deal then' (Jones, 1992, p217)

signified with his misreading of Burns. This misreading confirms that Caulfield's ego is equally undeveloped: 'The empty self is filled with ready-made self-concepts; the fragmented self is held together on the surface, producing an illusion of real being' (Martin, 1988, p 25), is an observation that applies equally to Chapman or Caulfield. We recall that outwardly Caulfield appears to be normal but inwardly he is filling his head with bogus quests for knowledge (trying to find out where the ducks go in winter, for example) and his desire to be the catcher. He is a fictional character living a *fictional* life, and Chapman's identification with him fatally adds another layer: naïf and reader conspire in a double fantasy (ironically, Chapman asked Lennon to autograph his latest album on the very day he shot him – it was called *Double Fantasy*) fuelled by a double misreading.

The unbearable triteness of being

Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) centres on Andy, Dag and Claire as they attempt to navigate a way through the ideological minefield of a late capitalist society. The trio of twentysomethings are aggrieved at their lack of fulfilment – they work in 'McJobs', low-paid, low-expectation, low-yielding temporary employment, and gravitate toward drink and drugs. They are viewed as underachievers by the parental culture, and have lived through the scandal of Watergate, the breakdown of family values and find

it difficult to fit in. What is interesting from the point of view of cult fiction is that they *choose* to live this way; they are highly educated and live in a period of unparalleled affluence in society. In other words, they experience anomie yet are confined by the institutionalised nature of bourgeois institutions. There may be plenty of consumer choice, but it is inseparable from guilt: 'Diseases for Kisses (Hyperkarma): A deeply rooted belief that punishment will somehow always be far greater than the crime: ozone holes for littering'. As a result they suffer, 'Mid-twenties Breakdown: A period of mental collapse occurring in one's twenties, often caused by an inability to function outside of school or structured environments coupled with the realisation of one's essential aloneness in the world. Often marks the induction into the ritual of pharmaceutical age' (Coupland, 1991, p 54: 32).

Toward the end of the book, Andy spends Christmas Day with his parents and brother at the family home. Andy spends the morning filling the front room with 'hundreds, possibly thousands' (Coupland, 1991, 170) of candles. The scene is glaring and oppressive: all types of candles crowd every possible surface, such as the coffee table, mantelpieces and bookshelves. For all that the scene is dripping with Christian symbolism it remains a peculiarly irreligious affair – Tyler, Andy's little brother, bounds downstairs chanting the materialist mantra 'new skis, new skis, new skis, new skis ...' and his father vaguely describes the candlelit room: 'It's like *Paris*' – yet for Andy it is an epiphanic moment: 'the light is

painlessly and without rancour burning acetylene holes in my forehead and plucking me out from my body' (Coupland, 1991, 170). But his is not a vision shared by the rest of the family, and soon 'normal life resumes'; mother makes coffee, father deactivates the smoke alarm and Tyler 'loots his stocking and demolishes his gifts: "New skis! I can die now!"' (Coupland, 1991, 171). Andy is alienated; his parents revert to type, his brother's consumerism is religion, acquiring the skis is the culmination of a faux-spiritual quest. It is at this point that Coupland opens out the narrative to appeal to the cult reader: 'It is a feeling that our emotions, while wonderful, are transpiring in a vacuum, and I think it boils down to the fact that we're middle class'. Here this middle-class guilt tugs at cult readers, and the vehicle that facilitates this moment – the imagery of heat and light. Just as Andy is at pains to light the candles, so too do cult readers 'catch' the light that he is imparting, as he says: '... any small moments of intense, flaring beauty such as this morning's will be utterly forgotten, dissolved by time like a super-8 film left out in the rain' (Coupland, 1991, p171).

In order to appreciate this passage in terms of cult fiction we have to call on the services of an unlikely source, namely Walter Pater. The Oxford don's book *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* became an underground campus hit due, in no small part, to the conclusion, which in the best traditions of Romanticism urged its readers to seek out, cultivate and indeed promulgate sensory and visionary experience. For Pater, the importance was not the 'fruit of experience'

but 'experience itself' and these visionary 'moments' should 'burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life,' (Pater, 1998, p152). Pater's appeal to immediacy became a rallying call for the book's admirers, including Oscar Wilde, to pursue thrills and frissons. Pater was perturbed by the cult readership that grew up around the book, was cautioned by the college, and subsequently the conclusion was edited out. (In a later edition he explains this action: 'I conceived it might possibly mislead those young men into whose hands it might fall', (Pater, 1998, p 150); in other words, he feared the cult reader's symbiotic reading.) However, it is the 'Preface' which is enlightening here:

Those whom the action of the world has elevated and made keen do not live in isolation, but breathe a common air, and catch light and heat from each other's thoughts. There is a spirit of general elevation and enlightenment in which all alike communicate (Pater, 1998, pxxxiii)

Coupland's Christmas scene is a vehicle for cult interpretation. When he opens out the narrative – *our emotions are transpiring in a vacuum* – to his target audience, he uses Paterian symbolism. Andy wants to stave off this feeling isolation, and lighting the candles represents his need for immediacy. It is a moment he wants to 'burn' into his experience. For Pater the 'flame' referred to the quality of the inner experience, the 'delicious recoil' (Pater, 1998, p150) to the

'inner world of thought and feeling ... the flame more eager and devouring' (Pater, 1998, p150). Attended to in the appropriate manner, this inner experience has an 'exquisite passion' (Pater, 1998, p 152). It is clear in Andy's Christmas pageant that he is trying to grasp – however fleetingly (as Pater would support) – the moment of this experience. Lighting the candles is highly symbolic as it is Coupland's literal translation of Pater's idea of catching light and heat from other's thoughts.

Cult readers identify with Andy: this is a moment of truth, which for cultists burns with a 'gem-like' quality, and the message: 'we' may have everything but in reality we have nothing – except, perhaps, the nuclear apocalypse, the ultimate expression of all-consuming heat and light.

Another example of cult identification occurs in Don DeLillo's *Mao II*, which is perhaps his most overtly cult novel. Firstly, it has the 'glorious incongruity' of Maoists, or for that matter Moonies, in America. There is a nice balance here: Moonies belong to a religious cult that caused a political furore, while Maoists are ostensibly a political entity that inspired a feverish semi-religious following. The book opens with a scene from a mass Moonie wedding. This is important. The images of uniformity on an impossibly large scale – 'bridegrooms in identical blue suits, the brides in lace-and-satin gowns' (DeLillo, 1992, p5) – like Warhol's screenprints of icons such as Monroe, Jackie Kennedy and Chairman Mao,

entered US and British popular consciousness. It is difficult to apprehend in these post-Waco days but the Moonie movement the first media-friendly cult and such images as mass wedding beamed across the nation's TV screens, helped popularise public opinion, which, inevitably, felt threatened that such a sacred Western institution as marriage was being flouted. Thus such a popular image that DeLillo describes was in turn used by the ruling ideology to justify the threat: 'The other word is "cult". How they love to use it against us. Gives them the false term they need to define us as eerie-eyed children' (DeLillo, 1992, p9).²⁶ *Mao II* also deals with the role of the writer and the society: its jaded novelist Bill Gray has given up hope of radically changing society, which is not too far removed from the failure of radical idealism as we've already seen in the study of the Romantics. This notion of radicalism 'incorporated' reminds us of the plight of the Romantic poets. In his disillusioned state, Gray refuses to publish, even though he has been working on a novel for years. It is his – albeit self-defeating – way of rebelling against the system.

The threatening element of cult mentalities looms large in *Mao II*. Karen is suffering from post-cult stress disorder and has undergone rigorous 'deprogramming'. Juxtaposed with this is the threat of the masses – as DeLillo

²⁶ Compare this with Dawson's observation: 'The presence of violence, with the implied threat that it may happen again, heightens the anxiety that breeds misunderstanding between NRMs [new religious movements] and the public. The anti-cult movement, moreover does its professional best to sustain this fear of violence' (Dawson, 1998, p 131).

warns: 'The future belongs to crowds' (DeLillo, 1992, p16). The fear of mass cultural 'numbing' is evident from the very beginning of the novel. Scott listens to the bland strains of muzak as he prowls the bookshop shelves stacked with thousands of 'gleaming best-sellers'. Here, as we saw in the analysis of *Generation X*, the latent seductiveness of consumerism is overbearing. The books are tactically displayed – 'Covers were lacquered and gilded', 'standing on pedestals', 'set in clusters near the cash terminals', 'shrieking *Buy me*' (DeLillo, 1992, p 19). DeLillo juxtaposes Scott's search for a book with Karen's disastrous search for spiritual enlightenment. The scene is oppressive, book-lined walls represent the myriad of difficult moral choices that must be made in capitalist society; the wrong choice and you too might end up in a religious cult. Outside of the bookshop the scene is equally oppressive. Chairman Mao's colossal portrait hangs in a museum's atrium, an image which again calls to mind the masses, and is a subtle hint at the need for some kind of cultural revolution. It is within this backdrop that Scott finds a book that can help him map the moral maze. In other words, he discovers his cult book. 'He was a young man, shrewd in his fervours, who knew there were books he wanted to read and others he absolutely had to own, the ones that gesture in special ways, that have a rareness or daring, a charge of heat that stains the air around them' (DeLillo, 1992, p 19) – and he finds it in the works of Bill Gray.

There is much here that has already been discussed. Note the air of desperation – ‘absolutely’ – which echoes Ian Rankin’s statement about Don Winslow’s novel. Also there is a strong sense of greater involvement. The difference between a non-cult book and cult book is delineated by the way the latter specially gestures. Gray is not looking for a ‘normal’ book to read at his leisure. Note here a nod to Pater, in that a cult book is one that takes on heat and light. What we have here is this notion of the vulnerable reader (DeLillo describes him as being ‘totally and horribly exposed’, DeLillo, 1992, p53) looking to identify with a naïf character. Scott later describes the moment he first encounters Gray’s work. After a life of being seduced and sedated by capitalism ‘in a heavily carpeted shoestore’, he is ‘getting nowhere’, dropping out and in a ‘spiral of drugs and nonbeing’ (DeLillo, 1992, p51). That is until he reads Gray: ‘Whoa what’s this? That book was about me somehow. I had to read slowly to keep from jumping out of my skin. I saw myself. It was my book. Something about the way I think and feel. He caught the back-and-forthness’ (DeLillo, 1992, p51). This, we now know, is a common reaction to a book that inspires cult adoration. It is very similar to Ian Hamilton’s understanding of *Catcher in the Rye*. Scott’s reading, his interpretation of the works of Gray, is deeply symbiotic and involves a great deal of idealisation. It is so intense that Scott’s ‘journey out of nonbeing’ coincides with his quest to track down Gray. DeLillo tells us that Scott ‘wore mirrored glasses and carried a timeless Eastern text and he told drivers he was setting out to find a famous writer’ (DeLillo, 1992, p 58). This very contrived and stylised extract is the stuff of

cult. Mirrored glasses have a cool cache (Ray Ban-wearing icons such as Dean, Hopper, McQueen, etc), and it reminds us that readers often describe their experience of interaction with the cult book using cod-psychological terms such as mirror – ‘a cult book must, above all, serve as the mirror in which the alienated see themselves reflected – and rejoice’ (Whissen, 1992, pxxx). Note also the very conscious image of the eastern text. The spiritual journey is also important.

For Scott, finding the writer is a thinly veiled task of ‘finding’, to use the pseudo-mystical jargon of the hippie 1960s, ‘oneself’. Scott finally achieves his desired goal that is to be with the author, break into his circle. After stalking him Gray lets him work for him and he eventually works so closely with him that he eventually has the power to control his career (he works as an agent). This is the fantasy that every cult – fanatical – reader plays out. Think Stephen King’s *Misery* – every reader has the fantasy that he might be recognised by the author of the book that recognises him or her. Ian Hamilton went to great lengths to track down the elusive Salinger who wrote the book that ‘spoke’ to him. This, of course, is self-delusion. But it is the necessary by-product of such a symbiotic reading.

It is extremely significant that when Scott does have the power to influence the inner life of Gray it is to perpetuate his dislocation from the mainstream. It is Scott who is the driving force behind Gray’s reluctance to publish. But what is really

happening here? Well, Scott is trying to 'protect' Gray from the masses, just like a classical piece of music. He wants to protect him and he tells himself it is for the writer's benefit. 'Bill is at the height of his fame. Ask me why. Because he hasn't published in years and years and years ... We could make a king's whatever, multimillions, with the new book. But it would be the end of Bill as a myth, a force. Bill gets bigger as his distance from the scene deepens' (DeLillo, 1992, p52). Note here that Scott has made the ultimate identification by referring to a 'we'. This is something that is reiterated by Bill himself: 'Art floats by all the time, part of the common bloat. But if he withholds the book. If he keeps the book in typescript and lets it take on heat and light. This is how he renews his claim to wide attention. Book and writer are now inseparable' (DeLillo, 1992, 68) This last point highlights something common to cult fiction. Writer and books are often inseparable. Here Gray is trying to reclaim the primacy of the author. If a cult book is outwith the conscious control of its creators as then here is the author trying reclaim the novel. This is very significant. Here Gray also utilises the images of Paterian 'heat and light'.

When in the end it slowly dawns on Scott and Karen that Gray isn't coming back, they fulfil the cult reader's ultimate fantasy: they assume his identity, and carry on in his name; making posthumous decisions for him: the reader and hero become one. It is worth focusing on this episode a little further. It is the logic of idealism taken to the extreme, just as in the case of Chapman, and it is the logical and

inevitable conclusion to idealisation. Scott is the naïf. And he is identifying with the hero, just as Chapman does. It is no coincidence that DeLillo has Karen and Scott secretly take charge of Gray's estate: one ex-cult member and cult reader fused in cult group disillusion. They begin to believe that the writer's success has been co-dependent²⁷ 'We're the ones who made it possible for Bill to devote his whole time to writing,' says Karen, to which Scott replies, 'We removed every obstacle' (DeLillo, 1992, p223). They have the ultimate secret (Bill's real name). When Scott talks of the time when their plans have been found out he invokes the extreme cult imagery of Charles Manson and Sharon Tate: 'Blood and slogans on all the walls' (DeLillo, 1992, p223). DeLillo then gives the reader another very stylised and contrived image: 'Scott leaned toward her to sing a bit of old Beatles, a line about carrying pictures of Chairman Mao' (DeLillo, 1992, p223). This is a little hint as to the self-referential nature of the heat and light moments. Mao's heat and light quoted in the *Sargent Pepper* album – which has itself received much cult adoration – which is then quoted by Scott the cult reader. Soon Scott assumes the Bill image, that of the isolated writer: 'he sat in the attic alone through the rainy morning, hunched over the lightbox, making notes.' (DeLillo, 1992, p223). He has control of the manuscript: 'word would build and spread, and the novel would stay right here, collecting aura and force, deepening old Bill's legend, undyingly' (DeLillo, 1992, p224).

²⁷ Co-dependence is an established technique used by NRMs to ensure the members allegiance to the cult movement. It is a form of emotional blackmail: if one individual were to leave the whole group would fall apart.

Something of the mechanics of cult reading is beginning to show through: books and readings gather Paterian heat and light because they are not part of the mainstream. Using DeLillo's novel we reach a better understanding of the cult book's relationship with the mainstream. As suggested in the introduction to this thesis, the notion of cult fiction is inextricably bound up with the idea of sensibility, of responding to the text in an emotional level (in the case of Mark Chapman, and Ian Hamilton we have seen what happens when the emotion interaction is too strong). As our study of Italo Calvino and cult "classics" revealed, readerships seek the experience of affection. Using Barthes and post-structuralism is helpful, but it only reveals half the story, for cult adoration is undeniably a sensibility, concerned with the immediacy of the heat and light of a particular vision. Cult is always seen as being anti-mainstream, the esoteric nature of its acculturated boundaries are almost always resisting mass cultural reading strategies, because it seeks to preserve these moments. Like the national electricity grid, if a lot people 'plug' into the experience then somewhere along the line the light and heat will dull, straining to accommodate the increasing amount of users. If too many people plug into the experience then there is a power cut.

CHAPTER THREE

Swinging Sixties

'Smoking dope and hanging up Che's picture is no more a commitment than drinking milk and collecting postage stamps'
(Abbie Hoffman, *Steal this Book*, 1996)

The rise of new religious movements in America and to a lesser degree in Britain from the early 1950 to mid-1970s has great significance for the study of cult fiction. Both literary cult mentalities and the rise in countercultural awareness originate in the same timescale as increased fascination with alternative religions, and one pivotal figure in all three instances is Allen Ginsberg. I will examine the contribution of Ginsberg and the Beats in the next chapter, but first I would like to expound further on the significance of religious cults and their relationship with literary cults.

Is it enough to experiment with drugs and sex? Was it enough to deck the halls with countercultural iconography? Was this radical movement doomed to failure like its predecessor? To answer this has important ramifications for cult fiction and its claims to transgressiveness and, in order to do this, it is necessary to look at who exactly inhabits the countercultural movement of the 1960s.

In the 1960s, as in the Romantic period, there was a sense that a great period of history was about to give way to a new era. There was a feeling that a 'new sensibility' (Susan Sontag), a new pluralism, was taking flight. As in the Romantic era, poets and writers increasingly became occupied with political and

social injustices; their works loosely feeding into the rebellious spirit we now know as the counterculture.²⁸ Frank Musgrove, along with other critics such as Stuart Hall, Patricia Waugh and Neil Nehring, view this countercultural urge in terms of Romanticism: 'Nineteenth-century Romanticism was strikingly like the contemporary counter culture in its explicit attack on technology, work, pollution, boundaries, authority, the inauthentic, rationality, and the family' (Musgrove, 1974, p 95). The counterculture was closely tied with intellectual seats of learning, such as universities. Universities became to breeding ground for disaffection, and riots, sit-ins and 'happenings' were common and it is in this milieu that the explosion in cult fiction happens. For Thomas Whissen, it is 'clearly located in the United States where, in the first few decades following the Second World War, the growing number of books that became underground or campus favourites turned the phenomenon of the cult book into a discernible movement' (Whissen, 1992, px). Will Self concurs²⁹ and Umberto Eco states that 'cult is born in a moment of crisis (spiritual, social, economic), attracting on the one hand the truly poor and on the other some 'rich' with a self-punishing syndrome' (Eco, 1985, p99).

Great interest in alternative religions (especially Eastern) swept through halls and student haunts, giving books such as Hermann Hesse's *Siddharta* and

²⁸ Malcolm Bradbury defined the counterculture as 'expressing the blanks and indeterminacies of materialist culture. Post-humanist, messianic, often mystical' (Bradbury, 1992, p 205).

Steppenwolf great cult kudos. Religious cults proliferated in this era. In 'Keeping Our Metaphysics Warm: Sacred Impulses In A Secular Age', Waugh suggests that 'in the 1960s [there] was [a] perceived concern to relocate spiritual significance after "The Death of God" in a subterranean rather than supernatural sphere: in the hidden depths of the individual psyche or the private life rather than in an impersonal and divine order' (Waugh, 1995, p62). There was a desire for a mystical, 'visionary' religiosity, which found its perfect recruiting ground in and around the campus.³⁰ Posters of Hunter S Thompson, William Burroughs and Ken Kesey hung on student bedrooms were a sign that the doors were well and truly open to drug experimentation. But the counterculture wasn't interested in 'hard' drugs (although the Beats eventually gravitated towards heroin), it was more concerned with the potential of cannabis and LSD to aid visionary experience. This again has a connection with the Romantics, such as Coleridge, who in search of imagination and intuition experimented with such drugs as opium. 'The priority given to feelings and intuition over rational inquiry may explain, in part, the significance attached to the use of marijuana and hallucinogenic or psychedelic drugs,' for they heighten an awareness of one's "self" within the universe' (Thomas, Gecas, Weigert and Rooney, 1974, p113).

²⁹ 'Most of the titles on the 1966 list ... owe their cult status to the influence of the Beats and its broadcasting by hippies et al during the 1960s' (Self, 1996).

³⁰ See Steven M Tipton *Getting Saved from the Sixties*, 1982, University of California Press

Unease in America grew during the Kennedy years; the brinkmanship of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and Vietnam stoked the fires of radical opposition, while in Britain, the failure of Harold Wilson's government to bring about his much-vaunted vision of a classless society and social reform, and increasing industrial unrest brought opposition from new insurgent subcultures bolstered by liberal attitudes to authority, sexuality, censorship and injustice. Anti-Vietnam sentiments dominated (in British universities anti-intervention protests were tinged with frustration at the government's continued support of American aggression).

But exactly how disenfranchised was this vulnerable group? Were not the 1960s an era of unparalleled social advancement that benefited most of society? It is important at this stage to elaborate on Eco's comment. 'Cult,' and by this he has in mind the conventional sense of the word³¹ and the cult 'artefact' – be it a film or a book³² – attracts not only the poor but the 'rich' with a 'self-punishing syndrome'. What does Eco mean here? This is, of course, a reference to the middle-classes radicals that populated the countercultural movement in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. It is worth looking at this group in closer detail, as cult readerships largely recruit its members from this section of the counterculture.

³¹ '*Cultis*, all that is involved in worship, ritual, liturgy and some form of religious worship; devotion or homage "paid by a body of professed adherents or admirers"' (OED)

³² See his 'Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage' in *Faith in Fakes*

The counterculture and affluent consumer society have almost always been locked in a dialectical relationship. As capitalist societies get richer, so does counterculture's rank and file burgeon, its aim to provide new models of consumption that react against the capitalist order;³³ and, on an ideological level, consumer society can often justify its existence by referring to counterculture as threatening and anarchic. In his seminal study *Ecstasy and Holiness: Counter Culture and the Open Society* (1974), Frank Musgrove sees this opposition as a paradox. 'That rich societies have produced a counterculture marked by frugality and low consumption,' he states; and he concludes that asceticism as transgressiveness is a fallacy: 'in the counterculture no-one wants to be *too poor*' (Musgrove, 1974, p18). It is quite obvious here that poverty – few members of the counterculture have the strength of conviction to take a 'Trappist order', he observes – has ever been the fickle ally of freedom. 'The aim is a sort of genteel poverty, with the concept of gentility radically revised. (The revised version has, in fact, strong aristocratic overtones.); instead, 'it indulges the senses and glories not in restraint but in abandon and exuberance' (Musgrove, 1974, p18: 17).

Musgrove's use of such phrases as 'indulges the senses' and 'abandon and exuberance' are by now cue cards in this thesis: reminders of the linear progression from the Romantics. Interestingly, Musgrove adds that the

³³ In *Aquarius Revisited*, an eye-witness account of the counterculture, Peter Whitmer states: 'The message of that summer [1967] seemed clear: that in an age of conspicuous consumption, it was not only possible to live off society's excesses, it was great fun' (Whitmer, 1987, p189).

'counterculture is a revolt of the unoppressed' consisting of hippies, 'quaintly archaic', and student activists, 'experts in the legal niceties of university committee procedure' (Musgrove, 1974, p19), which draws him nearer in sentiment to Eco. Approximately three-quarters of the hippie counterculture was made up of the middle class and upper classes³⁴, those of 'superior scholastic attainment' (Musgrove, 1974, p20)³⁵ with idealism to burn. Unlike the (mostly British) phenomenon of subculture, whose members were mostly made up of the working classes, the counterculture had a complex relationship with bourgeois society – because it is coming from *within* that culture, thus dangerously oscillating, in a way subculture could not as it is coming from out with bourgeois society, 'between two extremes: total critique and – its reverse – substantial incorporation' (Hall and Jefferson, 1976, p62). Thus the counterculture attempted to spread out the way, most notably demonstrated in the 1968 Paris riots when students supported the workers: reputedly the time when Eco's 'truly poor' were in synergy with the self-punishing rich. Instead, the counterculture often gains its 'dangerous' reputation by association with the working classes, the counter

³⁴ See L Yablonsky, *The Hippie Trip*, 1968, Pegasus: New York

³⁵ Education played a major part as informed students formed social groupings, bolstered by such things as Eastern mysticism and experimental drug taking, that would eventually form a basis for a countercultural movement which questioned the inherent values of the 'parent' culture. As Stephen Tipton states: 'the counterculture challenged utilitarian culture at the most fundamental level. It asked what in life possessed intrinsic value, and to what ends ought we to act. It rejected money, power, and technical knowledge, mainstays of "the good life" of middle-class society, as ends good in themselves. Instead, it identified them as means that did not, after all, enable one to experience what is intrinsically valuable – love, self-awareness, intimacy with others and nature' (Tipton, 1982, p84).

culture is 'selectively persuasive', says Musgrove, and often 'adopts many values of the heroic working class' (Musgrove, 1974, p22).

By looking at the counterculture we can begin to develop a clearer picture of the typical cult reader. Cult readerships are fickle, certainly, but also privileged; they too are selectively persuasive and have the scholastic attainment, and, as Pierre Bourdieu might have it in *Distinction*, they have the 'cultural capital'. The typical cult reader, to paraphrase a famous Norman Mailer quotation, is *a beatnik who reads*, who can decipher intellectual 'codes'³⁶, and possesses, like the Romantics, a tendency, as Reiss might have it, to let emotion 'spill' out beyond its limits and against all intellectual reasoning.

Who's afraid of the Steppenwolf?

Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* became an underground campus hit during the middle to late 1960s. The novel had all the ingredients the counterculture would come to value: sex, drugs, eastern mysticism and political struggle. It also charts the self-discovery of the bourgeois Harry Haller and his struggle to come to terms

³⁶ Keroauc in *The Subterreans* credits the fictional poet Adam Moorad [the novelist's nod to Ginsberg]: 'They are hip without being slick, they are intelligent without being corny, they are intellectual as hell and know about Pound without being pretentious about it' (Keroauc, 1988, p20)

with both the pious respectable side of his personality and that of his 'wild', untamed social outsider doppelgänger.

Again the dialectical relationship between 'society' and the margins is invoked.

The savage baseness of the wolf (from the Steppes of Russia) is seen as being in direct contrast to the comfortable bourgeoisie: 'If the world is right, if this music of the cafes, these mass-enjoyments and these Americanised men are pleased with so little are right, then I am wrong, I am crazy. I am the Steppenwolf that I often call myself; that beast astray who finds neither home nor joy nor nourishment in a world that is strange and incomprehensible to him' (Hesse, 1965, p39). Like Goethe's Werther, Haller is 'a soul of extremely emotional and unusually delicate sensibility' who finds the baseness of society deadening. The language of Haller's suffering is articulated in a manner that resembles what we have already discussed about the delicate sensibility of Romantic poet.

Significantly, and in accordance with most cult heroes, this suffering is a badge of moral and intellectual superiority for his 'sickness of the soul' of a 'sickness of the times themselves, the neurosis of that generation to which Haller belongs, a sickness, it seems, that by no means attacks the weak and worthless only but rather those who are strongest in spirit and richest in gifts' and, as a result, accepted the 'loneliness as his destiny' and the possibility of suicide: 'call it an infamous and ignominious escape; still, any escape, even the most ignominious, from this treadmill of suffering was the only thing to wish for' (1965, p12: 28: 8).

When Haller enters the 'Magic Theatre, Entrance Not For Everyone, For Madmen Only' (Hesse, 1965, p41) it is obvious that to display all the symptoms of mental 'sickness' (Haller's psychological difficulties are hinted at throughout the novel, from his 'artistic disorder' (Hesse, 1965, p18) to having 'a dimension too many' (Hesse, 1965, p177)) is to separate oneself from the mainstream.

Hesse's book clicked with the students in university campuses across the US, and to a lesser extent the UK. The counterculture saw in Haller a mirror: they, guilty of their middle-class status (Whissen states they were 'oppressed' (1992, p231), but in the light of the discussion above he might have been better advised to say they had the 'luxury of oppression') yearned to be more in touch with the untamed wolf, and reading Hesse's book at least gave them the fleeting impression they were doing so. However, the reason for invoking Hesse's Haller at this stage is to introduce Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg is perhaps the archetypal cultist – both as author and reader. As a writer who lived the life of a dedicated poet-priest – not just writing about it but living it – and as a result he enters the cult hall of fame, where 'pride of place is reserved for those authors whose walk is as transgressive as their talk. Writers are expected to be as dislocated from the mainstream as their characters. The most charismatic cult writers are those who seem to have lived as saints, seers or pioneers of a consciousness at its extremes' (Calcutt & Shepherd, 1998, px).

Both Haller and Ginsberg share striking similarities. Ginsberg and his fellow Beats sought to get more in touch with their wild, primitive sides in order to react against the bourgeois, which they achieved through sexual deviancy, (faux) criminality and a tenuous use of psychopathology. The Beats appropriated the 'poet-as-psychopath' image, using it like the Steppenwolf image to distance themselves from the numbing mainstream. The Steppenwolf's greatest primordial gift is his 'Howl', for in Ginsberg's great work the poet very deliberately enters the same madhouse that Haller does by playing on the poet-as-psychopath image: '... and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy' (Ginsberg, 1997, p131).

This poet-as-psychopath image is a very powerful but ultimately flawed one. Ginsberg was by no means an out-and-out psychopath. Though the poet had spent some time in a psychiatric home ³⁷ and was throughout his life in therapy, Ginsberg had a very esoteric slant on his psychopathology: it was visionary, and not shared by the rest of society – like the artistic glory of his hero Blake. 'It was society's requirement of uniform behaviour and its rejection of aliens which was, Ginsberg believed, the cause of his mental crisis' (Campbell, 2001, p245). Ginsberg made full use of the image, though it is clear that he promotes what Musgrove would say its heroic values. In 'Footnote to Howl' the poet invokes the

³⁷ Ginsberg did attend the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute in 1945, though mostly as a way to escape a custodial sentence.

'madman in holy' while calling on the 'the crazy shepherds of rebellion' (Ginsberg, 1995, p134). He uses it most famously in the opening line of 'Howl', 'I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness' (Ginsberg, 1995, p126) and draws on it when in 'On Burroughs' Work', he urges 'don't hide the madness' (Ginsberg, 1995, p114). This opposition is clearly illustrated in 'America', where Ginsberg alludes to images of mental troubling: 'I can't stand my mind', 'I don't feel good', 'I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closet' and 'my mind is made up there's going to be trouble' and 'I am talking to myself again'. He even, as Norman Mailer would later, reverses the opposition and speaks of the 'insane demands' [i.e. the 'sane' demands] of post-war, middle-class America. 'I don't want to join the Army or turn lathes in precision parts factories,' he states. 'I'm nearsighted and psychopathic anyway' (Ginsberg, 1995, pp147-48). Joseph Heller in *Catch-22* did something similar.³⁸

This idea of psychopathology is one that Mailer contributes to in the same period. For Mailer in *The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster*, in order to break from the prison house of America³⁹, one had to 'encourage the psychopath in oneself' (Mailer, 1972, p 276). What is interesting about Mailer here is the

³⁸ Yossarian, pitted against what society deems 'normal' behaviour – war, increased flying missions against an unknown enemy – must plead insanity, yet to cult readers this insanity is in fact the most 'sane' thing to do. Yossarian is the naïf; sensitive, brave, individual, interested in culture and art, a humanitarian locking horns with something much bigger, which cult readers have transformed to be representative of the antidemocratic, quasi-fascist 'establishment' intent on pursuing conflict in Vietnam.

language he uses to articulate the opposing realms of sanity and insanity is very similar to that of Haller. The task of the hipster would be to 'divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self'. To do this Mailer *reverses* the opposition: he sees the stultifying numbness as the true ailment 'that domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore a sickness' (Mailer, 1972, p271; 269).

In his highly influential essay, Mailer disagrees with Robert Lindner, author of *Rebel Without A Cause: The Hypnoanalysis of a Criminal Psychopath*, who stated the 'the psychopath is an agitator without a slogan, a revolutionary without a programme: in other words, his rebelliousness is aimed to achieve goals satisfactory to himself alone' who 'like a child cannot delay the pleasures of gratification' (Lindner, qtd in Mailer, 1972, p276). Mailer states that this childish impatience in the psychopath means he is 'better equipped' to rebel in modern America because, like the child, he demands instant change, 'immediate gratification toward that wider passion for future power which is the mark of civilised man'. In this way, 'like children, hipsters are fighting for sweet ... unstated but obvious is the social sense that there is not nearly enough sweet for everyone' (Mailer, 1972, p275). For Mailer, this radical movement adopted all the positive characteristics of childish impetuosity – impetuosity directed toward social change. The counterculture's call to immediacy did provoke the desired

³⁹ Abbie Hoffman popularised this image in his highly influential work, *Steal This Book*: 'Steal This Book is, in a way, a manual of survival in the prison that is Amerika [sic]. It

response from parental culture – ‘Misdirected adolescents – I think they should be spanked’, (Major General Lewis B Hershey, qtd in Whitmer, 1987, p179) – but the Beats took this primacy of unchecked emotions to new solipsistic lows, as Ginsberg was to learn when he met WH Auden.⁴⁰ Ginsberg displays all the vagaries of Thomas Whissen’s Romantic agony.⁴¹

I want to reverse Mailer’s statement that ‘the hipster is an enfant terrible turned inside out’ (1972, p269) by showing how Ginsberg turned away from his radical roots, instead more resembling a ‘terrible infant’ to support Will Self, in his essay ‘My Generation’, when he states: ‘I suspect there may be something intrinsically nerdy and trainspottery about the notion of the cult book. Something not just male, but also ineluctably sebaceous, eternally Clearasil’ (Self, 1996).

To Mailer the hipster was ‘a philosophical psychopath’ or an ‘antithetical psychopath’ who ‘possesses the narcissistic detachment of the philosopher’ and ‘who extrapolates from his own condition, from the inner certainty that his

preaches jailbreak’ (Hoffman, 2002, pxxi)

⁴⁰ Auden chided Ginsberg for his over-indulgent reading of Whitman: ‘I quoted the first line of Whitman, “I celebrate myself,” etc., And Auden said, “Oh but my dear, that’s so wrong, and so shameless, it’s an utterly bad line”’ (Ginsberg, 2000, p 228). Campbell says of the meeting that ‘Auden thought Ginsberg’s poems were “full of the author feeling sorry for himself”’ (Campbell, 2001, p 240).

⁴¹ Campbell notes that when writing ‘Kaddish’, dedicated to his mother Naomi, Ginsberg remarked in a letter to [date] Kerouac: “I sat weeping in the Cafe Select [Paris] ... I write best when I weep, I gotta get up a rhythm to cry’ (Campbell, 2001, p246). Miles tells of an episode when Ginsberg and fellow Beat Gregory Corso travelled to Oxford for a reading in 1958: ‘They demanded to know where Shelley’s rooms were. Dom Moraes, not having the slightest idea, vaguely indicated the nearest door. Gregory flung it open

rebellion is just, a radical vision of the universe which thus separates him from the general ignorance, reactionary prejudice, and self-doubt of the more conventional psychopath' (1972, p275: 281).

It is clear that the Beats were drawn to the image of the psychopath because it was a natural position outside the mainstream that elicited the immediate and desired response of outrage of middle America. It is appropriate to invoke the idea of the 'prison-house' of America. As with his sexual proclivities,⁴² Ginsberg also wanted to perpetuate his wild, Steppenwolf side by seeking the 'edginess' of the criminal. The Beats were also attracted to the poet-as-outlaw image as it offered another vehicle to rebel against the bourgeois mentality of the day. In particular they were influenced by Andre Gide's notion of 'le crime gratuit' – 'Howl' enshrines Carl Solomon for this – as well as Jean Genet's *Journal of a Thief*. But perhaps the most obvious way Ginsberg et al displayed their wild side – the 'wise primitive in a giant jungle' (Mailer, 1972, p 275) – in opposition to a bourgeois America was in adopting the stance of the American Negro.

Norman Mailer, the figure behind the influential *Village Voice*, was the main articulator of this point. The hipster was an 'American existentialist' who was suffering a 'slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct

and fell to the ground, crawling over the carpet, kissing it reverently, while the occupant of the room ... stared in horrified silence' (Miles, 2000, p239).

⁴² In 'America', the poet also alludes to his homosexuality, 'America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel', as a way to put him on the periphery of mainstream culture.

stifled' and whose salvation lay in absorbing the 'existentialist synapses of the Negro' (Mailer, 1972, p271: 273). For the hipsters the Negroes cause represented a real minority that was trying to counter oppression through various strategies such as music (jazz) and existential philosophy derived from primordial hedonism: 'he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body' (Mailer, 1972, p273). This call to bodily immediacy, as conceived by Mailer, is a new spin on the Romantic notion of idealism. For Mailer, the Negro had been living in a constant state of rebellion, and the 'White Negro' – a 'ménage à trois' when 'the bohemian and the juvenile came face-to-face with the Negro' (Mailer, 1972, p273) – provided a stance from which to tackle the bourgeois. In 'Howl' Ginsberg talks of the 'angelheaded hipsters' who walk the 'negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix' (Ginsberg, 1995, p 126).

Yet there is something not quite right about this adoption of the Negro cause. For the hipsters were not so much *living* it but indulging, in the best Romantic sense of the word, expressions of the self. Musgrove might have it that they had all the scholastic achievement to *sympathise* with the Negro cause, but little way of genuinely feeling it: in other words they were 'selectively persuasive'. The hipsters were intellectualising and idealising the Negro cause and were perhaps guilty of reading slightly too much into it. In his book on the Beats, *Paris*

Interzone, James Campbell suggests that, 'With nothing of the hard criminal in him, this was Ginsberg's way of chipping at the stubborn, bland, smothering social fabric' (Campbell, 2001, p247).

We can extend this notion of lack of authentic criminality to cover most of the Beats. Perhaps with the exception of William Burroughs, who shot his wife in the famous 'William Tell' episode of 1951 (though it would be incorrect to say he was a hardened criminal, as he was from an extremely privileged background), most of those radical poets didn't have a serious criminal bone in their bodies. Rather they wanted to assume the reputation almost by intellectual osmosis. It was, Campbell notes, a typically middle-class way of exerting radical difference.

For the Beats it was a lifestyle choice, but for "Negroes" it was a harsh reality. 'The hipster refused to accept conventional society,' says Campbell, 'the Negro was refused by it'. This is a very valid point, for a 'real' Negro living with the 'real' consequences of alienation – Campbell here invokes the black writer Chester Himes⁴³, who stayed at the so-called Beat Hotel and was long living the life of the outsider before Ginsberg and his cronies – 'would have seen Ginsberg and his friends as just another bunch of middle-class white kids slumming it on his territory' (Campbell, 2001, p258: 256).

⁴³ 'Years before Kerouac, Himes had said 'We gotta go' he [Himes] had long since dropped out; he had been on the road all his life. Society had dropped *him*. He derived no consolation from the imagery of the rebel: long hair, casual dress, drugs, cool music; he was, as Baldwin would say, just trying to live' (Campbell, 2001, p 255).

It is difficult not to agree with Eco at this point and his astute observation that the typical cult reader slums it, which takes us back to Eco. So what is happening here? Rather than cultivating a broad and encompassing radicality the Beats only tended to appeal to a limited audience, those with the cultural capital to recognise the meanings. Mailer admits as much when he states: 'their importance is that they are an elite with the potential ruthlessness of an elite, and a language most adolescents can understand instinctively, for the hipster's intense view of existence matches their experience and their desire to rebel' (1972, p276).

If only the countercultural Beats had read into the fate of the Steppenwolf character some home truths and realised that coming from within the contracting and expanding boundaries of the bourgeoisie⁴⁴ often negates any chance of radicalism: 'Despising the bourgeois, and yet belonging to it, they add to its strength and glory' (Hesse, 1965, p66). Instead 'the bourgeois today burns as

heretics and hangs as criminals those to whom he erects monuments tomorrow' (Hesse, 1965, p75).

⁴⁴ 'In fact, the vital force of the bourgeoisie resides by no means in the qualities of its normal members, but in those of its extremely numerous "outsiders" who by virtue of the extensiveness and elasticity of its ideals it can embrace' (Hesse, 1965, p64).

Ginsberg is an interesting figure in a discussion of cult fiction. His reading of Blake is a very involved one, and is not all that far removed from Chapman's reading of *The Catcher in the Rye*. One afternoon in 1948, Ginsberg was reading Blake's 'Ah! Sunflower' in his Harlem apartment when suddenly he had an epiphany. His visionary epiphany was facilitated by his symbiotic reading – in his biography *Ginsberg*, Barry Miles states that the poet was absent-mindedly masturbating while he read, which is in itself the ultimate symbiotic identification – 'This was the moment I was born for. This initiation, this consciousness of being alive unto myself, the spirit of the universe was what I was born to realise' (Miles, 2000, p99). Blake was Ginsberg's 'talisman'. In 'Psalm IV' (1960), he states, not unlike Chapman and Hamilton, that Blake's 'voice rose out of the page to my secret ear never heard before' (Ginsberg, 1995, p238). Ginsberg, elated with this visionary interaction, states: 'From now on, I'm chosen, blessed, sacred, poet, and this is my sunflower, my new mind. I'll be faithful the rest of my life, and I'll never deny it and I'll never renounce it' (Miles, 2000, p102). Here Ginsberg adopts the mantle of poet-priest. Certainly Blake makes his influence felt in Ginsberg's work. 'Who' (1973) states: 'I realised entire Universe was manifestation of One Mind –/My teacher was Blake – my life Poesy,/transmitting that spontaneous awareness to Mankind' (Ginsberg, 1995, p595).

But Ginsberg would later realise that his obsession with Blake's visionary imagination was ultimately unfulfilling. As a result, some of his later poetry is filled

with images of failure. 'Yes and It's Hopeless' (1973) envisions the hopelessness of the world on the brink of nuclear apocalypse: 'hundred million cars running out of gasoline', 'the entire solar system running Thermodynamics' Second Law down the whole galaxy', '300,000 junkies in NY', where the work of Burroughs, Shakespeare Krishnamurti and Ginsberg himself (Ginsberg, 1995, p598) – 'live corpse of Ginsberg the prophet/Hopeless' – cannot effect change. In 'Ode to Failure' (1980), the poet berates himself: 'I never dissolved Plutonium or dismantled the nuclear Bomb [sic] ... I have not yet stopped the Armies of entire Mankind in their march toward/World War III', 'O Failure I chant your terrifying name, accept me your 54 year old Prophet/epicking Eternal Flop' (Ginsberg, 1995, p737).

Here the trajectory is complete, and from a radical seer to a frustrated failure, as Carl Solomon, the inspiration behind 'Howl' succinctly put it. 'He published all this data,' he says, 'for the 'most raving self-justification, crypto-bohemian boasting a la Rimbaud, effeminate prancing, and esoteric aphorisms plagiarised from Kierkegaard and other – in the form of 'Howl'. Thus he enshrined falsehood as truth and raving as common sense for future generations to ponder over and be misled' (Miles, 2000, p117). Thus Ginsberg's legacy is viewed unfavourably; rather than a visionary force of change he is a figure implicated in propagating the very values of the bourgeoisie he sought to attack '... he who despises law,

virtue, and common sense, is nevertheless captive to the bourgeoisie and cannot escape it' (Hesse, 1992, p65).

Ginsberg, the intellectual, the middle-class idealist, cannot escape Haller's legacy:

In theory he had nothing whatever against prostitution; yet in practice it would have been beyond him to take a harlot quite seriously as his equal. He was capable of loving the political criminal, the revolutionary or the intellectual seducer, the outlaw of state and society, as his brother, but as for theft and robbery, murder and rape, he would not have known how to deplore them otherwise than in a thoroughly bourgeois manner (Hesse, 1965, p 63).

But by the early 1970s, the countercultural mood had changed. Hope in a societal revolution was all but over. This is partly due to the idealist over-estimation of the power of the imagination to change the political status quo. In *Harvest of the Sixties* (1975), her re-evaluation of the mythology of the counterculture of the 1960s, Patricia Waugh in calls this optimism as 'a Jacobean Faustianism in many literary works of the time' (Waugh, 1995, p7).

This, of course, takes us back to the Romantic era and its insistence on the power of the imagination. But to find out how countercultural expressions work in the contemporary moment we must look at Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*.

Radge revolution

Susan was talking today about art, about that surrealist guy who painted little businessmen floating through the sky and apples that fill up entire rooms – Magritte. She said that if Surrealism was around today, 'It'd last ten minutes and be stolen by ad agencies to sell long-distance calls and aerosol cheese products' (Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs*, p44)

Is cult a genuine radical crack in the monolithic bourgeois mythology? Or is it the permitted, and indeed necessary, process of reification inherent within ideological formations? To what extent is the counterculturalist's rebel yell an easily appropriated iconoclasm? How many times will we hear *Anarchy in the UK* at the end-of-term student disco? These questions may all be answered by tackling the core assumption: that in this phase of accelerated, omnipresent capitalism it is becoming increasingly difficult to tease out the counter cultural voices we call the underground. In order to elucidate the relationship between all the above it would be beneficial to have something of a case study.

Irvine Welsh's initial radical reputation was secured in the backwash of his cult guru pretensions. Early in his career, Welsh intentionally placed himself at the forefront of a post-Beat countercultural wave and, as a result, he successfully assumed the role of risk-taker in a sheepish society. He was called the 'voice of the ghetto' and assumed a subversive anti-formalism: 'Welsh's fiction is a world away from the conventional narratives of British writing,' a *Guardian* journalist claimed. In the same article, Welsh taps into a post-punk ideology which, ironically refers back to the drug induced poetics of the Beats, and more generally, the 1960s preoccupation with LSD, when he states: 'Whereas punk was saying: "You're all crap, we can do better", what *Acid House* is saying is very different. It's saying: "We don't want anything to do with this, we want to stay as far away from the mainstream as possible."' ⁴⁵ Allied to this was the fact that his writing was seen to have some purpose of influencing or at least talking about social praxis: 'The notion of social apartheid, and the degrading, dehumanising effects of economic and social deprivation, are constant in Welsh's work'.⁴⁶ This role of visionary is one that Welsh has cultivated with statements such as, 'I'm trying to explore some of the ugliness and the contradictions and the mess in the culture that we're in'⁴⁷, or that his novel 'raises more issues about the type of society we live in than *Sense and Sensibility* or *Four Weddings and A Funeral*'.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ John Mulholland, 'Acid Wit', *The Guardian*, 30.03.95

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ Alan Chadwick, 'Trainspotting hits the stage full tilt', *Sunday Times*, 01.05.94

⁴⁸ Irvine Welsh, 'The Confessions of Irvine Welsh', *The Big Issue*, 29.03.96

Welsh's reputation as an iconoclastic great is a result of his efforts to assume the role of cult writer who lives like his characters – on the edge, partying with pop stars and repeatedly flaunting a drug ideology in his interviews. Welsh was no publishing innocent for he had a prescient understanding of the literary world⁴⁹ and as a result carefully cultivated a guru image. Soon he was regarded as the spokesperson for Chemical Generation; the visionary, the pioneer who sees this is a movement intended, predictably, to shock bourgeois moralities with a poetics of disruption inherited from the likes of Burroughs and early Ginsberg.⁵⁰

This was a sub-cultural grouping made a 'cross-over': 'It's where literature meets the street. It's where the E Generation and the *TLS* generation make common cause', a movement in conflict with the cultural dictators in which is the guru figure, 'In the cultural war now at hand, Welsh is the undisputed Forces Sweetheart'.⁵¹

Private Eye noted the historical connection this movement, locked in some idealised conflict with bourgeois institutionalism, had with the Romantic era, 'a variety of fashionable attitudes [...] from faintly complacent *fin de siècle*

⁴⁹ 'This medium, literary fiction, is a middle-class plaything, so you're analysed, dissected and defined', John Mulholland, 'Acid Wit', *The Guardian*, 30.03.95

⁵⁰ It was a 'subgenre [that] grew up of the writings that explore the more wayward expressions of the Zeitgeist', John Walsh, 'It starts with an E', *The Independent*, 07.02.97

⁵¹ John Walsh, 'It starts with an E', *The Independent*, 07.02.97

romanticism [to] E as salvation for the labouring classes'.⁵² Welsh is also seen as inheriting the same dilemma as the guru figures of the initial wave of 1960s counterculture: 'For Welsh is, of course, already that most recognisable of post-1960s paradoxes, a counter-cultural institution, an exile on main street who manages to define key aspects of the national zeitgeist'.⁵³

But there is a yawning chasm here, and one that echoes the beginning of this thesis: how can something not of the mainstream effect some kind of social interaction? Can an exile on main street be 'the nasty urchin who bursts the bourgeois cultural balloon'?⁵⁴ In many ways Welsh wanted to readdress the imbalance in the 'literary and serious fiction' of the 'supposedly hip writers like Amis or McEwan' whereby 'the working-class characters are seen as oafs to laugh at and are denied any kind of inner life, the kind that middle-class people have'⁵⁵ by writing sympathetically and in close proximity to the culture he depicts. Welsh clearly sets out on the same task as that of the Romantic artists. He clearly wants to address a certain section of the population and redress this much-maligned idea of the junkie: 'In classic Scottish fiction such as William McIlvanney and Alan Spence you see the junkie coming into their books as this

⁵² 'Money for old dope', *Private Eye*, see appendix A

⁵³ Lee Spinks, 'Ecstasy', *Scottish Literary Journal*, Autumn, 1997

⁵⁴ John Mulholland, 'Acid Wit', *The Guardian*, 30.03.95

⁵⁵ *idib*

sort of shadowy cardboard cut-out figure who's there to undermine or subvert decent Scottish working-class values.⁵⁶

In the early years Welsh seems to have succeeded in his goals. He was called, 'the great white hope of Scottish lit'⁵⁷ who was upsetting middle-class 'voyeurs' who 'want to shop around for their next cultural fix'.⁵⁸ He was even regarded as a genius, which, as we have seen, is part of our experience of the Romantics.⁵⁹

Welsh's first novel *Trainspotting* certainly seems to have pressed all the correct buttons. Alan Freeman argued: '*Trainspotting* speaks the word on the street. The subject matter is gritty, unpleasant, authentic; a transcription of reality, particularly low-life reality. Its language is non-standard, offensive', dramatising 'the drug sub-culture' which is a sign that 'fiction is flourishing in Scotland despite receiving its death-rites'.⁶⁰ Welsh's new reality, another critic contests, was to be a 'shock . . . for the middle classes, be they of a "liberal" or "conservative" hue' because the characters are 'talking and interacting in ways they cannot recognise'.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Young, 'Blood on the tracks', *The Guardian*, 14.08.93

⁵⁷ Alan Chadwick, 'Trainspotting hits the stage full tilt', *Sunday Times*, 01.05.94

⁵⁸ Domenic Cavendish, 'I'm sorry everybody', *The Big Issue*, 19.02.98

⁵⁹ *Private Eye* complained: 'Well, here it is again: the illuminating spectacle of ageing southern public schoolboys taking up acres of space in the posh prints to acclaim "skill, wit and compassion that amount to genius" (*Sunday Times*)' and published a cartoon showing Welsh in bed with a fop-type character that resembles Oscar Wilde (see appendix b)

⁶⁰ Alan Freeman, 'Realism fucking realism', *Cencrastus*, No.57

⁶¹ 'The Confessions of Irvine Welsh', *The Big Issue*, 29.03.96

Here Welsh remains faithful to the culture he depicts, creating a 'hyper-realism' that 'illustrates the incoherence of selfhood' where 'words are emptied of full semantic content' so much so that '*Trainspotting* refuses to offer any moral certainty', which in turn allows the author to expose 'the destructive one-dimensionality of the Western bourgeois individual'.⁶²

However, this reputation proved to be short-lived:

But dissent is what *Ecstasy* provokes, since the collection of these "Romances" details the gradual withering of an idiosyncratic talent almost to the point of nothingness itself. For *Ecstasy* is not a novel, or a series of short-stories, or even three deliberately-constructed romances; it is a collection of end-notes, the leavings of an imagination so in thrall to the culture it once sought to dissect that its principal mode is one of slack-jawed reverence. From iconoclast to groupie in less than four years.⁶³

The thesis's examination of the failure of the Romantic poets and their revolutionary values works to provide a practical framework for the above analysis: the promising beginning obliterated by a downward spiral and slack-jawed transgressiveness; from iconoclast to groupie, from outward sympathy with a radical purpose to sloppy expressions of failure. Welsh seems to ape the

⁶² Alan Freeman, 'Realism fucking realism', *Cencrastus*, No.57

⁶³ Lee Spinks, 'Ecstasy', *Scottish Literary Journal*, Autumn 1997.

countercultural gestures of his forefathers too such an extent that they have lost any sense of radicality; as Brian Morton suggests, his is 'a kind of Burroughs-like junk language, grossly and intimately performative. It expresses a society-outside-society, but unlike Burroughs, cognitively displaced world, it still somehow insists on a place in the old world of mam and dad, home, school and university'.⁶⁴

What happens almost simultaneously with this failure is that Welsh is 'adopted', like some drug-fuelled prodigal, into the canon of English literature controlled by those middle-class intellectuals that he sought to resist. This is a process that has already afflicted the Lake Poets. Such is his safety that critic Philip Hobsbaum writes, 'If they like Welsh, they may go on to Kelman. If they like Kelman, they may go on to Lawrence and Dostoevsky . . . Reading Welsh might form the first precarious step towards cultivating a lifetime's delight in literature.'⁶⁵ Here Welsh is seen as an integral part of a larger literary environment and seen not, as he the writer wishes, as an agent provocateur.

Thus Welsh is in bed with the enemy and the enemy are left 'kicking themselves that they weren't born with Irvine Welsh's disadvantages'.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Brian Morton, 'Sharing Needles', *New Statesman and Society*, 06.08.93

⁶⁵ Philip Hobsbaum, Brought to book in the modern classroom, *Sunday Times*, 17.11.96

⁶⁶ See appendix B

Where *Trainspotting* succeeded, the rest of his oeuvre failed to challenge convention, an example of radical engagement turning to adoption, as Freeman argues: 'Where *Trainspotting* sets up and then undermines its social and literary conventions with sophisticated, searching irony, the second novel only sets them up. The narrative stance is distant from the content of the story, and the novel seems to confirm the prejudices of the kind of bourgeois perspective it is intended to challenge'.

Now, Welsh's fiction of 'fracture, disintegration and damaged identity' writing, the critic further argues, is now 'a readily identifiable motif, all too easily assimilable in writing', thus:

the social margin of hard-drug culture reveals the dynamics of the respectable bourgeois mainstream . . . Drug culture enacts the glamour of the outsider, the anti-hero beloved of modern Western culture, the imaginative antidote to bureaucratic circumscription. Yet the image of the anti-hero is closely related to the proliferating modes of representation in commodity culture. Far from being free, this modern individualism is a product, a commodity bought and sold, and the anti-hero is both consumer and consumed, a signified dispersed within the grammar from which emerges. By buying into this model of personal identity, we subsume less pervasive or glamorous

codes; we replace one system with another, adhering to system while expressing resistance to it.⁶⁷

Welsh is the writer bought and sold, seduced and abandoned. Far from being the cult writer attacking institutionalisation Welsh is brought to the *aid* of both the establishment and the commodity capitalism. The cult hero with his relationship with the margins with 'heteroglossia and polyphony, essential markers of subversion'⁶⁸ is returned bought and sold: radical tactics that are easily appropriated those middle class brats it meant to attack, as Welsh rather unwittingly states: 'Now you see all these fucking twats on the King's Road, all these fucking Sloane Rangers saying, [he assumes posh London accent]. "Ah you fucking radge, Jimmy, ah fuck off radge", and all this kind of crap.'⁶⁹

From the words of the author himself comes the language of defeat. From the once transgressive writer comes the expression of failure, as his disruptive poetics are now established in the ears of the rank-and-file middle-classes.

Welsh is naive when he suggests that staying away from the mainstream has its advantages because it is, as Freeman suggests, 'much more difficult to package

⁶⁷ Alan Freeman, 'Realism fucking realism', *Cencrastus*, No.57

⁶⁸ Willy Maley, 'Subversion and squirrility in Irvine Welsh's shorter fiction', *Subversion and Scurrility*, p.46

⁶⁹ John Naughton, 'Who the hell does Irvine Welsh think he is?', *Q Magazine*, pp.79

for the market because it moves so rapidly, but he does not see that it is this very fast moving culture that perpetuates commodification. Here the transgressiveness of Welsh is returned, co-opted, empowering those whom it was meant to attack. Welsh becomes a 'forgery, passing off received cultural stereotype as authenticity',⁷⁰ whose novelistic devices intended to upset the bourgeoisie becomes ineffectual pastiches of countercultural writing, as Steven Poole suggests about *Filth*: 'an idea ripped off from William Burroughs'.⁷¹ In the face of his adoption – Freeman puts it more succinctly, 'manner complicit with the cultural assumptions of that bourgeois capitalist nexus'⁷² – Welsh attempts to redress his cultural commodification by taking an even more aggressive stance against the middle-class cultural arbiters by saying his new book *Filth* would be, '... more inaccessible, more hardcore. The accents will be harder, so spoiled middle-class brats who want to shop around for their next cultural fix will find it more impenetrable. And those lazy, wanky critics who don't quite get it can fuck off. This will be so much more hardcore that it will make *Trainspotting* look like regional panto'.⁷³

Welsh's desire to become more 'hardcore' represents anxiety about maintaining his countercultural voice in the contemporary culture of capitalism. The writer's stance on the 'margins', has been lost. This, in many ways, reflects what Michel

⁷⁰ Alan Freeman, 'Realism fucking realism', *Cencrastus*, No.57

⁷¹ Stephen Poole, 'From Scatology to Cant', *Literary Review*, August 1998.

⁷² Alan Freeman, 'Realism fucking realism', *Cencrastus*, No.57

⁷³ Domenic Cavendish, 'I'm sorry everybody', *The Big Issue*, 19.02.98

de Certeau speaks of in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), when he claims that 'marginality is becoming universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority'.⁷⁴ By this we can argue that Welsh work 'lacks a connecting point, a cultural application to make it more than a cult curiosity'⁷⁵ and it does so because there is as Douglas Coupland comments: 'no counterculture out there to represent'.⁷⁶

But by attempting to take a more vitriolic stance, Welsh only plays further into the hands of those bourgeois critics against whom he is reacting. His stance returns him quicker and more readily to commodification and inertia: 'Welsh's recent works show this, portraying his subjects in a Welsh's extreme vitriolic stance forces the people who read his work into a predicament whereby [can choose] to buy into the Welsh mythology wholesale, ignore the flaws, buy the T-shirt, do the drugs, choose the life'⁷⁷ – in other words 'Irvine Welsh plc'. Welsh's commodification is almost complete. *Trainspotting* went 'supernova'.

It was turned into a successful play, a smash hit movie with a best selling album and to cap it all the 'most memorable poster of the Nineties and every

⁷⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p xvii

⁷⁵ Tom Lappin, 'Welcome to the working geek', *The Scotsman*, 04.11.95

⁷⁶ Brian Draper, 'Engaging in Reflection', *Third Way*, May 1997

⁷⁷ Neil Cooper, 'In on the act', *Scotland on Sunday*, 01.03.98

undergraduate's favourite T-shirt'⁷⁸ and radical gesture is confined to the end of term student disco fashion accessory.

The only thing that Welsh's commodification needs now is his untimely death to close the commercial loop fully. What held out radical possibilities for counterculture is now evolved to 'over-the-counterculture' with the transgressive behaviour at the centre of cult fiction has reached the middle of the marketplace:

In any case, conglomerate publishing [has] driven the knife into cult fiction before we got there. In the wake of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* and its runaway success, the selling machines set out to capture this newly discovered, non-traditional literary market. How many books are now aimed squarely and cynically at club culture, with jacket-designers taking their brief from DJ flyers and other 'yoof' accessories?⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Francis Gilbert, 'Where there's muck', Sunday Times, 25.06.98

⁷⁹ Andrew Calcutt, *Cult Fiction: A Reader's Guide*, pxvi

CONCLUSION

All you need is love-bombing

This thesis has looked at various aspects of cult fiction. I have attempted to show its historical perspective by examining the Romantic poets and looked at how Thomas Whissen came upon the idea of the 'Romantic agony'. I have also looked at the dangers in cult reading, in particular Mark Chapman's stringent interpretation of JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, which served to show how the cult religious mentalities feed into its literary counterpart. My discussion of Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* shows how cult reading strategies manifest themselves. Allen Ginsberg has been important to this thesis, for he helped put cult reading into the broader context of the 1960s and the increased countercultural activity of the era. While the analysis of Irvine Welsh has demonstrated how cult-guru pretensions are quickly co-opted and subsumed into the capitalist loop.

Cult fiction is undeniably concerned with a special sensibility. Cult books tempt readers to perform a unique interaction with the text. To borrow imagery from Walter Pater, cult books dazzle and burn with a gem-like flame. The reader makes a profound interpretation, what Whissen states is a symbiotic reading. Some critics, such as Hans Reiss when he discusses Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, may see this as a mis-reading. On the novel-reader scale there is a point when a conventional reading stops and a cult one takes over. Whissen argues that cult reading induces a 'mysterious alchemy', which in part produces an 'emotional narcosis' and acts like a 'temporary sedative' (1992, pxxxvi: xxii:

xxxvi), and the look at Mark Chapman and is extreme interpretation of Holden Caulfield's erroneous take on Burns has shown the fatal extremes a cult reading lead to.

The difference is in the psychological make-up of the cult reader. Looking at such things as the negative ego will remind us of the insecurities that make a cult reader proclaim, as Ian Hamilton does, that '*The Catcher* was the book that taught me what I ought already to have known: that literature can speak *for* you, not just to you. It seemed to me "my book"' (Hamilton, 1998, p12). This appeal to the ego is closely associated with an established technique for NRMs to recruit new members. 'Love-bombing' is a form of sensory overload. It is a term critics use to describe how cult religious movements ensnare members whereby 'the new recruit is surrounded with praise, compliments, flattery, affection, hugs, and other forms of emotional support, much as parents attempt to reassure and bolster the confidence of a young child' (Dawson, 1998, p 107).

This is an important point. Cult books also love-bomb their readers into submission. When someone refuses to succumb to such tactics, we call them 'conventional' readers. Look at *The Catcher*: part of its cult appeal is that it is able to 'catch and convey the adolescent's characteristic mixture of special, snobbish entitlement and insecurity' (Martin, 1998, p 35), and the cult reader – Hamilton, Chapman – is caught up in the Caulfield's unchecked solipsism. Even

before we meet Haller in Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, his biographer, acting like an indoctrinated cult member attempting to persuade someone to join the cult by speaking of him in hallowed terms as 'real Christian and a real martyr' (Hesse, 1965, p 16). His charisma is such 'that then a man like myself came under his spell on the spot. He had thought more than other men' (1965, p12). 'I certainly did not know how deep the loneliness was into which his life drifted because of his disposition and destiny and how consciously he accepted this loneliness as his destiny' (1965, p8). 'He belongs to those whose fate it is to live the whole riddle of human destiny heightened to the pitch of a personal torture, a personal hell' (1965, p28).

One way a cult book 'overloads' the senses is by promising salvation. DeLillo's character Scott thinks he has found a solution when he discovers the work of Bill Gray. Ginsberg has a similar reaction when he reads William Blake. However, as with the counterculture's idealistic, non-utilitarian individualism, or 'Jacobin Faustianism' that is easily co-opted by the bourgeoisie, the cult's promise of salvation has been appropriated by the very capitalist institutions it aimed to attack. So show the extent of this I will demonstrate with the following quotation, the authors of which I will temporarily withhold.

We hope that every woman who reads this book feels we are bullying them into submission. Pass it on to your girlfriends, but

keep it hidden from the boys and girls you don't like. The men
don't need to know how *you have suddenly become a siren*.
This is your secret weapon.

There is much here that I have already touched on in the course of this thesis.

The special relationship, the mysterious alchemy, which a reader has with a book transcend conventional ideas of reading. Note how 'bullying' resembles Ian Rankin's call to 'gulp' down. Note also the idea that reading this book will help you become a better person and, in this, it resembles the pleas of Haller's biographer in Hesse's *Steppenwolf*: 'let this little book be your friend whenever through fate or through your own fault you can find no closer companion' (Goethe, 1989, p23).

Note also the book is a way of separating you from the so-called crowd. The appeal of this book is similar to what Hamilton thought of *The Catcher in the Rye*, as a way of making and recognising friend or foe. Note the air of furtiveness: this is a 'secret weapon', and its message should not be given over lightly, just as Ian Rankin said about Winslow's *Californian Fire and Light*. Now, if we were to discover that the book from which this quotation was taken was called *What Not to Wear* (2002), by TV fashion gurus Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine, then the argument about how cult fiction is part of the capitalist loop would be reinforced. In the absence of a cultural reference point, in the absence of what

Coupland is keen to stress as a lack of a counterculture, cult fiction can only be co-opted.

In DeLillo's *Mao II*, Bill Gray sums up the cult fiction experience. Speaking about the loss of the writer's true role in society, he states, 'Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated' (DeLillo, 1992, p41). This is a clear reference to an aspect that has been the main argument of this thesis – that in the failure of the revolutionary goals of writers throughout the centuries, there is a turn inward. "But we're all drawn to the to the idea of remoteness," adds Gray. "A hard-to-reach place is necessarily beautiful, I think. Beautiful and a little sacred maybe. A person who becomes inaccessible has a grace and a wholeness the rest of us envy" (DeLillo, 1992, p 36).

However, in the end, the cult experience – of both author and reader – is an 'experience of limits [that] marks a longing to measure our longings, not a desire for *something*, but a yearning that humanly identifies us and differentiates us one from the other. While it lets us experience limits, it does so without ever vanquishing those limits or wielding any sort of truly radical power.' (Telotte, 1991, p16)

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