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Contested Mythologies: Nixon's America and the
Inscription of Political Crisis in the Fiction of Irvin
Faust, Rudolph Wurlitzer, Stanley Elkin and Donald
Barthelme.

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Abstract

This thesis proposes a new approach to gauging the political content of American postmodernist literature. Locating its analysis inside the historical intensities of the mid-60s through to the early 70s – the Nixon Years – it argues that the period’s experimental writing inscribes a climate of political crisis by invoking the mythologies that drive U.S. ideological thinking, and then unravelling the contestations inside those mythologies. The argument revolves around four case studies, each of which is tested for the degree to which its formal postmodernist strategies underpin a periodic expression of equivocation inside America’s foundational myths. In the first extended analysis of the novelist Irvin Faust, the author’s metafiction is shown to destabilise the inherited myth of City Upon a Hill exceptionalism, particularly around Vietnam. In the under-examined work of Rudolph Wurlitzer, the myth of the western frontier – re-invoked by Kennedy’s New Frontier in 1960 – is ontologically reimagined as a site of regressive violence as opposed to civilised progress. The Nixon Years novels of Stanley Elkin, meanwhile, are positioned as postmodernist parables whose rhetorical extravagance is targeted at the American myth of success, and the financial crisis of 1973. The discrete strategies of these three writers are then examined in aggregate in the work of a canonical postmodernist, Donald Barthelme, and lead to the suggestion that his major novels of the Nixon Years, *Snow White* and *The Dead Father*, are overarching expressions of a trajectory from a frustrated optimism in the Kennedy 60s to a crisis of political inertia and recursion in the Watergate mid-70s. The thesis concludes that American postmodernist literature can be read as a politically critical engagement with the grand narratives of America’s foundation, and its persistent political rhetoric, where the destabilisations of assumed narrative forms inscribe the disorientations inside America’s traditions of public belief.

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Chapter One

Introduction

We have always been, insofar as we are Americans at all, inhabitants of myth rather than history – and have now come to know it.¹

In 1969, early in the Nixon presidency, Leslie Fiedler posited a correspondence between a re-emergence of mythical thinking in American life, and an emerging experimentalism in American fiction. A new generation of writers – Fiedler called them ‘Post-Modernists’ – was confronting a crisis: a late 60s ‘time of Endings’ where, in politics, Nixon was talking apocalyptically of ‘cities enveloped in smoke and flames [and] Americans dying on distant battlefields’ and where, in culture, the novel was ‘not dying, but dead’ (*Gap* 61,65).² The new fiction’s response was to guide its readers toward ‘a transcendent goal, a moment of Vision’ by inscribing a ‘mythological Americanism’ into popular forms like the Western or science fiction (*Gap* 80,68).

Fiedler saw these mythical journeys as projecting ‘political or metapolitical meanings’ (*Gap* 80). The restoration of the Western for example, of foundational stories hitherto preserved in B-movies and pulp TV series, would promote ‘a great religious revival’, a national return to a childhood dream of ‘an idyllic encounter between White Man and Non-White [...] the world of magic and wonder’ (*Gap* 84,72). In this, Fiedler suggested, readers would confront, or transcend, America’s history of ‘violence in the woods’, the elimination of the Indians ‘whose last reflection, perhaps, [was] to be found in the War in Vietnam’ (*Gap* 71). ‘Post-Modernist’ myths would restore a ‘mythological innocence’ to Americans ‘awaiting the day when, no longer believing [themselves] to be innocent in fact [...] could decently return to claim it in fantasy’ (*Gap* 69).

Fiedler’s widely referenced essay drafted some early co-ordinates for a continuing debate over the political significance, and ultimate impact, of those American fictions – frequently fragmentary, often self-conscious, sometimes fabulous or outrageous – that were later more widely, but uneasily, labelled as *postmodernist*.³ The promotion of myth and

¹ Leslie Fiedler, *Cross the Border - Close the Gap* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), p.73. Hereafter *Gap*.

² Richard M. Nixon, ‘Accepting the Presidential Nomination: 8 August 1968’, in *The American Presidency Project* <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>> [accessed 12 March 2014]. Hereafter in footnotes *APP*.

³ For accounts of the term’s adoption see, for example: Ihab Hassan, ‘Toward a Concept of Postmodernism’, in *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1987), pp.84-96; Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.20-36; C. Barry Chabot, ‘The Problem of the Postmodern’, *New Literary History*, 20 (1988), 1-20; Andreas Huyssen, ‘Mapping the

fantasy to overcome a perceived inability in the novel's long tradition of realism to handle the 'apocalyptic, antirational, blatantly romantic and sentimental' conditions of late 60s America (*Gap* 62). The equivocal attitude towards critically engaging with the complexities of history as a means of intervening into the political complexities of the present. The raucous co-opting of popular culture to close 'the gap between high culture and low' and contest the literary elitism of the 'Culture Religion of High Modernism' (*Gap* 68,64).

David Lodge describes Fiedler's 'pop art' construction of postmodernism as determinedly oppositional and demotic: 'hostile or indifferent to traditional aesthetic categories and values, offering a polymorphous hedonism to its [largely youthful and countercultural] audience'.⁴ Some American critics at the time however decried a privileging of detachment. Gerald Graff accused Fiedler of promoting an 'anti-political [...] retreat into private subjectivity' which amounted to an 'all-out raid on reality, on the great and urgent problems of modern society'.⁵ Fiedler's favoured writers, Barth and Vonnegut together with later arrivals like Barthelme, were, Pearl Bell proclaimed, 'celebrants of unreason, chaos and inexorable decay [...] a horde of mini-Jeremiahs crying havoc in the Western World'.⁶

This thesis will seek to advance this debate. It will take up Fiedler's provocation, but take issue with his, largely escapist, view of myth's political potential. I will ask whether the activist passion I detect in the postmodernist writing of the Nixon Years is inscribed instead into a more critically urgent intervention into America's contemporary turbulence, and into its mythic invocations. I will argue that the innovative forms the new writing explores highlight a complex interplay between popular American mythologies – surrounding national exceptionalism, the western frontier, success as birthright – and American history; an ultimately rational, certainly more politically engaged and interrogatory, encounter between the foundational stories Americans 'inhabit', and which during the 60s were promoted as guiding personal and national providence, and events from the past or as actually lived in the present which destabilise America's mythic assertions. The experimental fiction of the Nixon Years is driven, I will argue, by a struggle between perceived mythical outcomes and historical experience for control of the American narrative at a pivotal moment in national life. Its emergent postmodernist forms are shaped by the intense contradictions of the late 60s and

Postmodern', *New German Critique*, 33 (1984), 5-52 (pp.11-16); Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p.112.

⁴ David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p.228.

⁵ Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp.76,223,7.

⁶ Pearl Kazin Bell, 'American Fiction: Forgetting The Ordinary Truths', *Dissent*, Winter, 1973, pp.26-34 (p.26).

early 70s that saw Kennedy's Camelot tumble towards Watergate, and progressive consensus turn to fearful conservatism and division.

My argument will develop through the case-study of four writers, each of who came to prominence in the Nixon Years. Two of them, Irvin Faust and Rudolph Wurlitzer, have received little critical attention. The third, Stanley Elkin, is more commented upon, but more for his extravagantly 'fierce language', and for his fabulously obsessive characters, than for his contemporary criticality.⁷ By referring authors who are largely under-examined (and generally interpreted narrowly when they are) back to the urgent conditions of the late 60s where their work originated, and by exploring how the contested politics there shaped their fictional innovations, I will seek to broaden the critical perspective on America's nascent postmodernism by suggesting it intervened directly into, and forged a distinctive political character from, a critical moment in American history. I will then bring my discrete analyses of Faust, Wurlitzer and Elkin to bear on the work of Donald Barthelme – 'America's preeminent postmodern practitioner' – whose two main novels, *Snow White* (1967) and *The Dead Father* (1975), bracket the Nixon Years.⁸ By so doing, I hope to throw into relief an otherwise under-explored political urgency in one of American postmodernism's canonical writers.⁹

I will seek to evidence three key propositions. First, that despite their perceived elusiveness, each of these writers captures the immediate political dynamics of Nixon's America by exploring an interplay between contemporary perceptions of myth and history. Second, that the innovative forms their texts variously adopt subject that interplay to an urgent and politically productive criticality, not least through the contestations they discover in America's turn-of-the-decade presentations of popular culture. And third, that highlighting Barthelme's Nixon Years politics goes some way towards reframing the critical debate over the politics of American postmodernist fiction as a whole: illuminating an inscription of urgent engagement which Fredric Jameson, for example, largely dismisses and registering a passionately topical commitment in strategies that proponents of postmodernist politics like Linda Hutcheon and Paul Maltby interpret as distanced, and coolly analytical.

⁷ Scott Sanders, 'An Interview with Stanley Elkin', *Contemporary Literature*, 16 (1975), 131-45 (p.133)

⁸ Amy Boaz, 'Review of *Not-Knowing*', *Library Journal*, 15 July 1997, p.68.

⁹ For a 'canonical' list of writers see, for example: Ihab Hassan, *Postmodern Turn*, p.85; John Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment', in *The Friday Book* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp.193-214 (p.195); Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.208. For Barthelme's 'canonical' status see, for example: Thomas M. Leitch, 'Donald Barthelme and the End of the End', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 28 (1982), 129-43; Maurice Couturier and Regis Durand, *Donald Barthelme* (London: Methuen, 1982); David Lodge, pp.220-245.

1.1. Political Readings of Postmodernist Writing.

Explicitly political readings of postmodernist fiction are a relatively recent development. Linda Hutcheon, for example, proclaimed it 'inescapably political' in 1987, some twenty years after Barthelme heralded the Nixon Years with *Snow White*.¹⁰ Critical activity during the intervening years may be productively described as attempting to discern a sense of, or space for, *agency* in writing that was confronting 'a crisis of representation', a term Bertens has employed to summarise the vast body of theoretical writing about changing human experiences of the world that emerged from the 60s onwards.¹¹ This 'postmodern condition' was, Eagleton observed, 'suspicious of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable and indeterminate'.¹² It pronounced, in Lyotard's influential diagnosis, an 'incredulity toward metanarratives', an erosion in those overarching systems of belief – 'myth' for Hutcheon, 'tall tales' for Arac – which had given shape, meaning and teleology to the world, and to art, since the Enlightenment: religion, experimental science among others.¹³ In America, on the cusp of the 60s, this registered in the emergence of, what Irving Howe would be among the first to call, a 'postmodern literature' as the product of a 'careless postwar prosperity [in which] the population grows passive, indifferent, atomized; in which traditional loyalties, ties and associations become lax or dissolve entirely'.¹⁴ Writers like Ronald Sukenick felt pressured to square a world that eluded secure representation – 'reality does not exist, time does not exist, personality does not exist [...] no one knows the plot' – with a disorientated audience suspicious of fiction's ability to be useful: 'they pick up a novel and they know it's make believe. So who needs it – go listen to the TV news, right?'.¹⁵

Under these circumstances, some critics and writers detected agency in the simple refusal to abandon writing. Hassan likened this to the legendary Orpheus, whose head

¹⁰ Linda Hutcheon, 'Beginning to Theorise Postmodernism', *Textual Practice*, 1 (1987), 10-31 (p.11).

¹¹ Bertens, p.11. See also: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp.9, 39-65; Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, *The Mythopoeic Reality* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1976), pp.10-21; Maxine Greene, 'Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representation', *English Education*, 26 (1994), 206-219.

¹² Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.vii.

¹³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.xxiv. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.6. Jonathan Arac, 'Introduction', in *Postmodernism and Politics*, ed. by Jonathan Arac (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1986), pp.ix-xliii (p.xiii).

¹⁴ Irving Howe, 'Mass Society and Postmodernist Fiction', in *Decline of the New* (London: Gollancz, 1971), pp.190-207 (pp.199,196).

¹⁵ Ronald Sukenick, *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* (New York: Dial Press, 1969), p.41. Ronald Sukenick interviewed in Joe David Bellamy, *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1974), pp.55-74 (p.56).

continued singing long after he had been dismembered by the Maenads. He saw an intrinsically oppositional posture in an emergent privileging of form which inscribed 'an erotic retreat from existence, from the flesh of reality' by 'de-realis[-ing a] world' which refused to be realised anyway.¹⁶ And in 1967, as TV images showed race riots in Newark and Detroit, Agent Orange deployed in Vietnam, and anti-war protestors placing flowers in police guns in Washington, Hassan wrote of a literature so 'inured to crisis [...] outrage and apocalypse' it was 'turning against itself, aspiring to silence'.¹⁷ Susan Sontag would similarly detect a 'mood of ultimacy' inspiring an 'aesthetics of silence' where a formalist refusal of reference registered as opposition: 'silence is the artist's ultimate other-worldly gesture: by silence, he frees himself from servile bondage to the world'.¹⁸

In one of the late 60s' most widely referenced literary manifestos, John Barth wrote of an 'exhaustion of possibilities' for inscribing 'an age of ultimacies and "final solutions" [...] the celebrated dehumanisation of society and the history of the novel'.¹⁹ In a 1967 where 'our government lied with more than usual egregiousness about our war [and] peppergas wafted through the academic groves', writers were forced, Barth suggested, to express an ungraspable world by highlighting the very fictionality of their own means for describing it, taking 'used-up' forms and, like Borges, producing self-aware confections to 'confront [...] an intellectual dead end and employ it against itself to accomplish new human work'.²⁰

Elsewhere, Poirier would see formalism as a performance of ecstatic liberation where writers inserted their individual subjectivities, 'an energy which is its own shape', into the 'gap [...] between contemporary techniques, be they social, political, literary, scientific or technological, and the sheer variety and abundance [...] which are supposed to be accounted for by those techniques'.²¹ Raymond Federman would promote his writing of 'surfiction' (an early construction of postmodernism as self-conscious surrealism) as exposing the 'fictionality of reality' – an external world where 'real fiction happens, everyday, in the streets of our cities [...] on the Moon, in Vietnam, in China (when Nixon stands on the Great Wall of China)' – by

¹⁶ Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), pp.13,12.

¹⁷ Ihab Hassan, 'The Literature of Silence', *Encounter*, 28 (1967), 74-82 (p.74).

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, 'The Aesthetics of Silence', in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Picador, 2002), pp.3-34 (p.6).

¹⁹ John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', in *The Friday Book*, pp.62-76 (pp.64,67).

²⁰ Barth, 'Exhaustion', pp.63,64,69-70.

²¹ Richard Poirier, *The Performing Self* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971), pp.xv.ix. See also Richard Gilman, *The Confusion of Realms* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), p.49: 'fiction cannot be a saviour or map maker of reality'.

using its formal possibilities to create worlds of its own.²² William Gass would see the writer feeling ‘the need to reconstitute, entire, his world’ which was otherwise ‘vacant of gods [...] all these forms of vacantness about him’.²³

The argument that postmodernist fiction might express an oppositional agency through formalist self-involvement, or via escapes into imagined worlds, would later underpin the poetics proposed by McHale. McHale’s 1987 claim that postmodernism was predicated on an ‘ontological’ dominant – as opposed to modernism which was ‘epistemological’ – suggested it was less engaged with investigating the world (‘What is there to be known? Who knows it?’) than with somehow reconstituting it: ‘what is a world? What kinds of world are there? [...] How is a projected world structured?’.²⁴ More concerned with assembling and describing examples of world-making, imagined zones and discursive construction than evaluating them, McHale nonetheless echoes Fiedler in suggesting that journeying into different ontological spaces is oppositional in itself, outside of what it might productively *say* about the real world it leaves behind. I will contest this view of ontological escape in my analysis of Wurlitzer in chapter three.

In the early 70s meanwhile some critics began reacting to the accusation that America’s new writing was not oppositionally *critical*, simply self-involved. Where Scott accused Brautigan, alongside Pynchon and Barthelme, of ‘retreating from the fact world’ into a ‘game [where] he simply romps [...] instead of resorting to judgement and objurgation’, Klinkowitz saw a ‘post-contemporary literature of disruption’ with a clear social purpose.²⁵ Drawing a distinction between the early ‘ironies and burlesques’ of Barth and Pynchon and those writers like Barthelme and the Vonnegut of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) who became prominent after 1967 – the ‘year of literary [as well as socio-political] disruption’ – Klinkowitz argued the latter group were engaged in acts of social symbolism, disrupting prevailing forms and patterns of thought to inscribe the very process of grappling with a new dispensation:

²² Raymond Federman, ‘Surfiction – Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction’, in *Surfiction*, ed. by Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), pp.5-15 (pp.7,6)

²³ William H. Gass, ‘Philosophy and the Forms of Fiction’, in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), pp.3-26 (p.23-4)

²⁴ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), pp.9-10.

²⁵ Nathan A. Scott, ‘History, Hope and Literature’, *boundary 2*, 3 (1973), 577-604, (pp.578,586,591). Jerome Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1980), preface - page unnumbered.

If what passes for reality is distressingly unreal, why spend time representing it? Physical, social, and political conditions may be a mess, and to view them from one perspective, imposing a rational order, is an aesthetic mess: so when everything else has changed, including the very ways we experience our world, should not the novel change too?²⁶

This critical perspective which now saw agency in capturing the experience of *living through* new conditions is highlighted by the changing attitude towards metafiction, the term Gass deployed to describe actively self-referential fiction-making.²⁷ In 1975, Scholes would echo Gass in suggesting metafiction's capacity for opposition was limited to a detached self-sufficiency: 'there is no mimesis, only poesis. No recording. Only constructing'.²⁸ By 1979 however Scholes would argue that while metafiction still 'tend[-ed] away from the direct representation of the surface of reality', its coincident focus on the making of *fictions* encouraged the creation of fabulations which, as extravagant forms of fable, might return 'towards actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy'.²⁹ I will explore the *political* potential inside fabulation in my analysis of Elkin in chapter four.

The strand of thinking that innovative American fictions were actively involved in *describing* the world, even if they felt unable to intervene into it, is best illustrated perhaps by Alan Wilde. Writers like Barthelme and Elkin, Wilde argued, were adopting a posture of suspensive irony, capable, on the one hand, of accommodating 'contingency, and even absurdity' as a 'perceptual response to a world without unity or cohesion' and yet acknowledging, on the other, 'a willingness to live with uncertainty, to tolerate, and in some cases, welcome a world seen as random and multiple'.³⁰ Wilde labelled this strategy of ambivalence 'midfiction', an uneasy halfway house between referential realism and a 'world-denying' metafictional interrogation which 'invites us [...] to perceive the moral, as well as the epistemological, perplexities of inhabiting and coming to terms with a world that is itself ontologically contingent and problematic'.³¹

²⁶ Klinkowitz, *Disruptions*, preface, and pp.188,32.

²⁷ Gass, p.25.

²⁸ Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p.7. See also, again in 1975, Zavarzadeh, p.39: 'the credibility of fiction is re-established not as an illuminating commentary on life but as a metacommentary on fiction itself'.

²⁹ Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp.114,3. See also, on metafiction's 'ethical' dimension: Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.364; Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), p.13.

³⁰ Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1981), pp.10,2,44.

³¹ Alan Wilde, *Middle Grounds* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1987), p.4.

The debate over whether postmodernist writing could be said to be *actively* political intensified through the late 70s into the 80s.³² It was driven in part by an emerging body of wider thought about how this new dispensation might be described or what it might mean. Foucault's work on discourse appeared in the early 70s, for example, Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* arrived in America in the early 80s, and Jameson started publishing on postmodernism in 1983.³³ And while some observers, like Newman, were hostile to the entire postmodernist enterprise, other critical voices largely accepted that its fictions could capture a *mood* of disorientation even if they lacked a means for agency beyond that.³⁴

Gerald Graff, for example, accepted that Barthelme and Elkin were delivering 'cultural statements' if only about 'the comic impossibility of heroism in a world paralysed by self-consciousness'.³⁵ But postmodernism as a whole, Graff argued, was simply an extension of romanticism and modernism's 'religion of art', and in continuing to privilege the 'autonomous imagination', denied itself 'rational and logical modes of making sense of the immense complexity of experience'.³⁶ Confronting a 'nightmare we want to escape' postmodernist writing's 'private subjectivity', lurching between the ecstatic and apocalyptic, resulted in 'escapist fantasies rather than critical thinking' and, in doing so, denied its oppositional formalism any ultimate capacity for political agency: 'the same impulse that turns formalism against society turns it against radical politics, for this politics is seen as a mere extension of the overrationalized, overorganized social order'.³⁷ With no apparent 'moorings in social reality' postmodernist fiction had no 'standpoint from which to represent the diffuse, intransigent material of contemporary experience without surrendering critical perspective on it'.³⁸ Agency might only be possible if writers adjusted the balance between myth – fantastic, private and escapist – and an engagement with history: 'a theoretical picture of modern historical reality which [...] is considerably more coherent [...] and more plausible than any of

³² By this time the label 'postmodernist' was widely used, thanks in part to: John Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment', in *The Friday Book*, pp.193-206. (Originally published 1979).

³³ Michel Foucault, *The Architecture of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1989); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, (London: Vintage, 1995); Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', trans. by Regis Durand in *The Postmodern Condition*, pp.71-84; Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp.111-125. For overviews of developing thought about postmodernism, see: Harvey, pp.39-65; Connor, pp.3-20; Bertens, pp.111-137.

³⁴ Postmodernism represents, says Newman, 'a violent adjacency of the idols of pure expressivity, which reflect more often than not an atmosphere of intense demoralization'. Charles Newman, 'The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation', *Salmagundi*, 63/4 (1984), 3-199 (p.11).

³⁵ Graff, p.227.

³⁶ Graff, pp.34-7,5.

³⁷ Graff, pp.223,99,78.

³⁸ Graff, pp.208,238

the willed mythologies on which so many writers have been forced to depend'.³⁹

The issue of how postmodernist art dealt with, or understood, history became increasingly central to the debate. Jameson influentially argued that in one respect postmodernism was *already* political: its artefacts mediated the complex social and political conditions – the global movement of finance and commodities – of post-World War Two late capitalism. Those same conditions however eroded postmodernist art's capacity for agency. Commodification, said Jameson, privileged the creation of images, exchange-value over use-value, which gave postmodernist artefacts 'a new kind of depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality'.⁴⁰ More specifically, this led to a 'weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History, and in the new forms of our private temporality' where lived experience was no longer able to 'unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life': experience fragments amidst deracinated images and decontextualized moments of intensity.⁴¹ This 'waning [...] of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way', in Jameson's Marxism, erodes the criticality that is necessary for political intervention and, in postmodernist fiction, sees history reduced to a 'set of dusty spectacles'.⁴² Jameson takes the example of Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) and notes that despite its clear political intentions – to explore the historical crisis inside the American Left – it can no longer handle history as anything more than a collection of disparate images, nostalgic references to real historical figures amidst inscriptions of fictional ones, which 'float [hologram-like] above the text but cannot be integrated into our reading of the sentences'.⁴³ Jameson sees postmodern experience as begging major political questions but in reducing art to empty pastiche, history to 'pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach', and public discourse to a 'heterogeneity without a norm', it simultaneously announces the 'absence of any great collective project' that might start to answer them.⁴⁴

The arguments that postmodernist culture, in and of itself, ends up 'remorselessly emptying [writing] of its political content', that it is ultimately a 'sick joke at the expense of [...] the revolutionary art of the twentieth century', are systematically countered by those who uphold postmodernist writing's capacity for intervention.⁴⁵ The tone was set, as early as 1972,

³⁹ Graff, p.238.

⁴⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), p.9.

⁴¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp.6,27.

⁴² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp.21,18.

⁴³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.23.

⁴⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp.25,17.

⁴⁵ Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', *New Left Review*, 152 (1985), 60-73 (pp.62,60).

by Spanos who argued that anti-rationalism and formal opposition were themselves calls-to-action. By disrupting the discourses and narrative assumptions that translated the illusion of a 'positivistic universe' into the 'comforting [...] well-made cosmic drama or novel', 'postmodern absurdists', like Pynchon, were effectively liberating readers from a climate of ontological deceit.⁴⁶ Pynchon's anti-detective stories, where Oedipa Maas for example searches for clues but cannot achieve epistemological certainty, remove the barriers-to-action that are the illusory 'protective garments of rational explanation'.⁴⁷ Later Russell would include Barthelme, Wurlitzer and Coover in an avant-garde 'activist aesthetics': their disruptive fictions demonstrating that 'if a political vision is implicit in both the social and aesthetic dimension of postmodernism, it is that of anarchism – the expression of a defensive rage and creative idealism'.⁴⁸ Russell's position however is largely one of nuance, a re-positioning of earlier oppositional claims, like Klinkowitz's, into a genealogy of political avant-gardism.

More substantial is Hutcheon's contention that political criticality is built into the very poetics of postmodernism. Working inside a body of contemporary theory – on discourse, the construction of representation, on the narrativization of history as discussed by Hayden White – Hutcheon argues that postmodernist art is intrinsically 'double-coded'.⁴⁹ It is caught inside a crisis of contradiction where, on the one hand, it perceives 'the inevitable absence of such universals [as] stable aesthetics and moral values' but where, on the other, it continues to seek the reassurance of coherent narratives and historical meaning:

Postmodern art [...] asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control and identity that have been the basic premises of bourgeois liberalism [...] postmodernist art offers a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world [...] a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticising, that which it seeks to describe.⁵⁰

By embracing contradiction, by accepting its complicity in contested systems of belief while retaining – or indeed promoting – the formal means for criticising them, postmodernist art is 'inescapably political', not least by highlighting discourses (here Hutcheon references Foucault)

⁴⁶ William V. Spanos, 'The Detective and the Boundary', *boundary 2*, 1 (1972), 147-168 (pp.150,152).

⁴⁷ Spanos, p.157. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Picador, 1979).

⁴⁸ Charles Russell, *Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud Through Postmodernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp.245,254.

⁴⁹ Linda Hutcheon, 'The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History', *Cultural Critique*, 5 (1986-7), 179-207 (p.192). See also: Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1980), 5-27.

⁵⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp.6,13,23.

which have become 'a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting-point for an opposing strategy'.⁵¹

Hutcheon specifies 'historiographic metafiction' as a politically explicit strand of postmodernist writing. Novels like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) – in Hutcheon's privileged examples – self-consciously draw attention to the fictionality of their own, and indeed narrative history as a whole's, constructions of the past: what Hutcheon calls 'the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualized accessibility* to us today'.⁵² By recognising that 'historiography is always teleological: it imposes a meaning on the past [and] so too does fiction', historiographic metafiction poses political questions for the historical precedents that may be applied to legitimise present understandings, or restores those ex-centric voices who may have been unfairly excluded from mainstream historical narratives.⁵³ Where Jameson sees postmodern culture commodifying history and rendering it inaccessible, Hutcheon sees postmodernist fiction promoting a vital debate about history's role in constructing cultural assumptions:

The postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalise some of the dominant features of our way of life: to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as "natural" (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact "cultural": made by us, not given to us.⁵⁴

Contestations over prevailing discourses also underpin Maltby's construction of a postmodernism of dissidence. Focusing on Barthelme, Pynchon and Coover, Maltby detects a concerted destabilisation of those forms of popular cultural language, notably 'mass-media discourses', which are perceived to promote the values of late capitalism by relaying ideology in the guise of public information and which therefore erode the 'public sphere' for productive political debate.⁵⁵ Here he addresses Graff's accusation that postmodernist subjectivity has emptied out language into an aesthetics of 'narcissism and self-contempt', and indeed Jameson's proposition that postmodernist language has become a fellow-traveller in a 'new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world'.⁵⁶ Drawing on the work of Marcuse and Lefebvre, among others, Maltby contends there is agency in detecting

⁵¹ Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p.185.

⁵² Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p.114.

⁵³ Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p.97.

⁵⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.2.

⁵⁵ Paul Maltby, *Dissident Postmodernists* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp.28,30.

⁵⁶ Gerald Graff, 'The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough', in *The Novel Today*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury (London: Fontana, 1977), pp.217-249 (p.232). Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.5.

the contradictions inside public discourse itself. On the one hand, dissident writing 'illuminates the institutional parameters of meaning-systems; it reveals how the latter operate in force fields of power relations; how, through the medium of ideology, meaning-systems are connected to established political structures'.⁵⁷ On the other hand, and while their writing's disruptive nature exposes these meaning-systems as fictional, Barthelme et al. cannot resist their simultaneous implication in language 'as a medium of social integration', as a site that, notwithstanding its ideological deceits, nonetheless offers a reassuring route through an otherwise forbiddingly complex world.⁵⁸

This review characterises the critical search for agency as a progress from the oppositional – formalist, elusive, tending towards 'silence' – to the eventual detection of postures which interrogate cultural and political assumption, and the textual forms which mediate them. It might also be characterised as a movement from passion to cool analysis. Early commentary on postmodernist writing adopted a broad tone of energetic expectation: whether evaluative, in Hassan and Sontag's anticipation of a new aesthetics, propositional, in Barth's and Sukenick's 'manifestos', or accusatory – even Graff and Scott were hoping for new writing that would confront 'a new fabric of reality which is beyond our capacity to administer or regulate'.⁵⁹ By comparison, later commentary – in response perhaps to Jameson's influential invocation of theoretical Marxism – tends to see the politics of postmodernist writing as an adjunct to a larger body of recent theory. This is not surprising perhaps as Hutcheon, and to an extent Maltby, are describing a poetics: identifying the terms of writing inside a broader dispensation of cultural thinking that was itself concerned with the management of public narratives, and the stability of language. What this sidesteps however is the degree to which politics are as much specific – to a time, a place, to particular challenges – as they are a basis for general analysis. And to that extent Hutcheon and Maltby privilege a set of general critical postures – how do we know history? What agendas operate inside public discourse? – over the specific political demands that may arise from particular circumstances. Hutcheon's case studies for example are both geographically and temporally wide-ranging, and although she acknowledges 'the energies of the sixties have changed the framework [...] of how we consider art', she regards the salient impact of Vietnam as reducible to general issues of discourse, 'a real distrust of official "facts"'.⁶⁰ I will explore metafiction's role in a more

⁵⁷ Maltby, p.39.

⁵⁸ Maltby, p.38.

⁵⁹ Scott, p.578.

⁶⁰ Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p.8,115.

periodically *precise* political critique – notably around the contestations between myth and history over Vietnam – in my analysis of Irvin Faust in chapter two.

My argument here seeks to restore the activism to what has become the analytical: to recover a primary sense of passionate engagement in fictions whose political specificities have been displaced by the later co-option of external theoretical postures, or by the promotion of a self-involved formalism. The argument begins with an examination of some of the forces at play in the American 60s and early 70s.

1.2. American Mythology and Nixon's America.

Andreas Huyssen has suggested that American postmodernism is distinctive, 'a genuine avant-garde movement' arising from the historical specificities, and ideological propositions, of the 60s:

A powerful sense of the future and of new frontiers, of rupture and discontinuity, of crisis and generational conflict [...] the historical constellation in which the postmodernism of the 1960s played itself out (from the Bay of Pigs and the civil rights movement to the campus revolts, the anti-war movement and the counter-culture) makes this avant-garde specifically American.⁶¹

Huyssen's use of language is significant. It identifies the myths – Kennedy's New Frontier – that America invoked to give narrative shape to the new decade's challenges while simultaneously highlighting the turbulence those same myths both proposed a trajectory through, but also in many ways provoked.

What Huyssen diagnoses in retrospect was also intimated, during the 60s and 70s themselves, by prominent observers who detected emerging tensions inside the stories America told about itself. In 1962, Daniel Boorstin anticipated Baudrillard's later work on America-as-simulacrum, by identifying a novel appetite for 'pseudo-events'.⁶² The theatre of government press conferences, the advertising of consumer goods as lifestyle choices had re-configured American ambition and affluence into a 'world where fantasy is more real than reality, where the image has more dignity

⁶¹ Huyssen, pp.24,20.

⁶² Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p.11. See also, Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) and Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1989).

than the original'.⁶³ Critically, Boorstin argued, America's foundational ideas about itself – as exceptional, as a beacon of democracy – had become slogans, detached from the responsibilities of politics or history:

The language of images is everywhere. Everywhere it has displaced the language of ideals. If the right "image" will elect a President or sell an automobile, a religion, a cigarette, or a suit of clothes, why can it not make America herself – or the American Way of Life – a saleable commodity all over the earth?⁶⁴

In 1976, after Watergate, Daniel Bell worried that America had loosed its 'transcendental tie [to] some set of "ultimate meanings"'.⁶⁵ He argued that 60s capitalism, the 'creation of new wants and new means for gratifying those wants', had destabilised two foundational narratives which had hitherto guided America's confident progress through history: the Puritans' exceptionalist faith in a 'covenant which committed each man to an exemplary life' and a myth of success moderated by Benjamin Franklin's notions of 'frugality, industry [and] self-improvement'.⁶⁶ As those narratives struggled, American life had turned from 'contemplation' and towards 'sensation, simultaneity, immediacy, and impact'; serious politics had turned to 'radical chic'; literature had defocused into the 'hallucinatory [a] psychedelic effort to expand consciousness'.⁶⁷

That American postmodernist writing emerged from a crisis of disorientation – a culture buffeted by history, clinging on to its sustaining myths – underpins my argument, although I reject Bell's dismissiveness. It is precisely the tense interplay between myth and history that gives Nixon Years postmodernism its political force. My methodology for evidencing this argument will be outlined in section 1.3. Here however I will review some of the background conditions wherein the foundational ideas of exceptionalism, frontier and Manifest Destiny and success collided with the contingencies of history in the American 60s and early 70s.

This thesis' primary focus is not the specific policies of the 1969-1974 Nixon administration. Nor is its sense of crisis solely reducible to Watergate. Rather, the Nixon Years are understood here to be the febrile arena, and pivotal point, for those disruptions in U.S. public life which transformed the 'Golden Age [of Kennedy's] idealised Camelot' to a pre-

⁶³ Boorstin, *Image*, p.37.

⁶⁴ Boorstin, *Image*, p.183.

⁶⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), p.21.

⁶⁶ Bell, *Contradictions*, pp.21,59,57.

⁶⁷ Bell, *Contradictions*, pp.111,20,77,29.

Bicentennial pessimism where 'many people [did] not know who they are or what they are or what they belong to or what belongs to them'.⁶⁸

The events therefore which plunged America into, what Lytle describes as, a crisis of 'uncivil wars' are not limited to what happened under Nixon's specific watch.⁶⁹ They include the invasion of Cambodia and the Pentagon Papers but extend back into Kennedy's first foray into Vietnam, and the stalemate of the '68 Tet Offensive which mocked American power. They include the 1970 shootings at Kent State, but also invoke the wider climate of generational unrest which culminated, in New York and Chicago, in the violent summer of 1968. And they include the rise of Black Power, but also the tense fall-out from the early 60s civil rights project: the assassination of Martin Luther King, and the 1965 Watts riots which 'set the tone of confrontation and open revolt'.⁷⁰

As such, the Nixon Years represent less a delimited chronology than what Raymond Williams describes as a 'structure of feeling':

Meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt [where] the relations between these and formal or systemic beliefs are in practice variable [including historically variable], over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences.⁷¹

For 'formal or systemic beliefs' read here the mythologies that acquired particular prominence in the political language of the 60s.⁷² The stories that, according to Flood, convey 'a group's spatial and temporal sense of itself [and contain] an explicit or implicit invitation to assent to a particular ideological standpoint'.⁷³ For 'formal assent with private dissent' meanwhile read the emerging contestations inside those mythologies as they were destabilised by events as experienced.

To that extent, the deterioration of America's national mood is registered in the contrast between two defining moments of rhetoric. In 1960, Kennedy's New Frontier unveiled a vision of domestic and global progress:

⁶⁸ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope Days of Rage* (London: Bantam, 1987), p.295. David Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p.273.

⁶⁹ Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America's Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.1-9.

⁷⁰ *Life* magazine quoted in Terry H. Anderson, *The Sixties* (Reading: Longman, 1999), p.74.

⁷¹ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.132.

⁷² See for example: Rico Newman and Kevin Coe, 'The Rhetoric of the Modern Presidency: A Quantitative Assessment', in *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism*, ed. by Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss (London: McFarland, 2011), pp.11-30.

⁷³ Christopher Flood, *Political Myth* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.33,42.

We stand on this frontier at a turning-point in history [...] beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus.⁷⁴

Eight years later, Nixon would recast Kennedy's project as a source of discord which had violated its own re-assertion of foundational ideals: 'America is a great nation [...] The American Revolution was a shining example of freedom in action which caught the imagination of the world. Today, too often, America is an example to be avoided and not followed'.⁷⁵

Both rhetorical postures were predicated on a shared myth of America's exceptional difference as a new nation. But historical contingency had divided Kennedy's vision of expansive opportunity from Nixon's image of a chastened Union forced to retrench amid wars foreign and domestic. In the Puritan myth of 'City Upon a Hill' exceptionalism, in the myth that the advance of the western frontier was also the advance of benign civilisation, and in the myth that personal success is the enlightened product of national birthright, 60s America found narratives that took it into Vietnam and then, overweening, fail there; narratives that promoted new rights and social mobility but underestimated the backlash of fearful picket fence protectionism; and narratives that privileged unrivalled affluence before foundering on the economics of unbridled consumption.

1.2.1. Exceptionalism.

That America is 'the empire of liberty', that it is not just 'the richest and most powerful of the world's [...] states but is also political and morally exceptional' is one of the most potent currents in U.S. popular belief.⁷⁶ Exceptionalism conjoins stories of national origin, geographical opportunity and geopolitical ambition into an assumption that America was 'created differently', that it was the 'embodiment of a prophetic universal design' where its citizens could enjoy 'a well-nigh universal expectation that the United States would inherit the future'.⁷⁷ It is a core notion that, in the 60s and 70s, conflicted with the experience of actual historical events to produce some of the turmoil that is the political subject of this thesis.

⁷⁴ John F. Kennedy, 'Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States: Los Angeles, 15 July 1960', in *APP* [accessed 14 June 2013]

⁷⁵ Richard M. Nixon, 8 August 1968.

⁷⁶ Thomas Jefferson, 'Letter to James Madison, 27 April 1809' in *The Thomas Jefferson Foundation* <<https://www.monticello.org>> [accessed 23 May 2016]. Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p.10.

⁷⁷ Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Is America Different?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.v. Sacvan Bercovich, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p.136. Daniel Bell, 'The

Exceptionalism's mythical status is largely rooted in the mysticism of its early statements, first emerging from the foundational moment when John Winthrop, about to sail west to New England in 1630, exhorted his fellow Puritans to repudiate the old world of Europe: 'wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us'.⁷⁸ After the 1776 Revolution, De Crevecoeur would celebrate the ideological distinctiveness of America's new nationhood ('he is an American who, leaving behind all ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced'), and for De Tocqueville the experience of the Civil War would distinguish U.S. democracy as 'quite exceptional [Americans'] strictly Puritanical origin, their exclusively commercial habits, even the country they inhabit [...] have singularly concurred to fix the mind of the American upon purely practical objects'.⁷⁹ Exceptionalism, Bercovitch suggests, underpins a semi-religious notion of 'Americanus' which, from the Puritan mystic Cotton Mather onwards, subsumes the vagaries of history into the 'mold of sacred teleology'.⁸⁰ In more secular terms, it drives what Lipset calls 'the American Creed [...] liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism and laissez-faire'.⁸¹

The strength of exceptionalist thinking at the start of the 60s, what Kammen calls both 'ideological and mythical [...] a devotion to the idea that this country could be exempt from the historical burdens that had overwhelmed Europe', was largely predicated on a perceived narrative of uninterruptedly successful national projects.⁸² The 1898 Spanish-American War, for example, was waged in accordance with 'the precepts laid down by the founders of the Republic'.⁸³ The prosperity that followed the world-wide recession of the 1930s was a sign of America's original and distinctive ingenuity. The Second World War consolidated America's claims to global leadership. This narrative of exceptionalist assertion appeared to legitimise

End of American Exceptionalism', *The Public Interest*, 41(1975), 193-224 (p.195). See also Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

⁷⁸ John Winthrop, 'A Modell of Christian Charity' in *John Winthrop, Papers*, ed. by A.B.Forbes (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929), p.295.

⁷⁹ J. Hector St. Jean De Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1793), p.46. Electronic resource: Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp.525-526.

⁸⁰ Bercovitch, p.136.

⁸¹ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (London: W.W.Norton, 1996), p.19.

⁸² Michael Kammen, 'The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration', *American Quarterly*, 45 (1993), 1-43 (p.11).

⁸³ William McKinley, 'Message to Congress Requesting a Declaration of War with Spain, 11 April 1898', in *APP* [accessed 14 July 2013]

America's conviction during the first part of the twentieth century that it could export its moral values, its political principles, and its economic ideas.⁸⁴

The Vietnam War emerged in no small part from a national subscription to America's exceptionalist myth. 'Communism', wrote Boorstin, 'provides them [exceptionalists] with the sense of "givenness", of obviousness of their objective. For them Communists embody the spirit of Satan as vividly as the American Indians did for the first Puritans'.⁸⁵ In 1961, Kennedy re-invoked the 'City Upon a Hill' as he sent the first Green Berets into Saigon and contemplated 'tasks of statecraft no less awesome than that of governing Massachusetts Bay Colony'.⁸⁶ And the subsequent escalation – and eventual overreach – was driven by an amalgam of exceptionalist ideas. 'An admiration of people "who deliver the goods"', an abiding faith in the ingenuity of the 'technological mentality', 'American political culture – the self-righteousness of our nationalism' combined, wrote Baritz, into a latter-day geopolitical test case for the foundational errand to 'determine whether men could live on earth according the will of the Lord'.⁸⁷

It is a sign perhaps of exceptionalism's political potency, but ultimate fragility, that Americans continue to equivocate over its realisation, and its consequences, in Vietnam. On the one hand, images of U.S. helicopters fleeing the Saigon Embassy in 1975 convinced commentators like Spanos that Vietnam had led to 'the self-destruction of the ontological, cultural, and political foundations on which America had perennially justified its "benign" self-image and global practice from the time of the Puritan "errand in the wilderness"'.⁸⁸ On the other hand, Reagan would re-invoke the 'City Upon a Hill' to politicise a revisionist notion that Vietnam was a 'noble cause', betrayed only by a failure of nerve: 'we must have the means and the determination to prevail'.⁸⁹ The experience however of subsequent American military

⁸⁴ See, for example: Ian Tyrell, *Reforming the World: The Creation of America's Moral Empire* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010). Michael Ignatieff, ed., *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005). John Agnew, *The United States in the World-Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁸⁵ Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p.188. See also Henry Steele Commager, 'Myths and Realities in American Foreign Policy', in *The Defeat of America* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1974), pp.19-47.

⁸⁶ John F. Kennedy, 'Speech at Massachusetts General Court, 9 January 1961', in *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library* <<https://www.jfklibrary.org>> [accessed 7 July 2012]. Hereafter KPL.

⁸⁷ Loren Baritz, *Backfire* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985), pp.327,323,322. Loren Baritz, *City on a Hill: A History of Ideas and Myths in America* (New York: Wiley, 1964), p.17. See also: Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1972).

⁸⁸ William V. Spanos, *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalisation: The Spectre of Vietnam* (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 2008), p.ix. See also Kammen, p.16.

⁸⁹ Ronald Reagan, 'Restoring the Margin of Safety: 18 August 1980', in Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum <<https://reaganlibrary.gov/s-reasearch>> [accessed 23 July 2017]. For an overview

interventions – in Iraq and Afghanistan – has prompted more recent observers to portray exceptionalist notions as ‘dangerous, because they are the soil in which unreal and hubristic assumptions of the American destiny have grown’ (Hodgson), or more simply as a mythical ‘encompassing state of fantasy [a] structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity’ (Pease).⁹⁰

At the height of the 60s however myth, fantasy and political potency coalesced around the notion that Vietnam was on the New Frontier, and the fight there revived the popular cultural image of the cowboy carving out civilisation from a savage wilderness.

1.2.2. The Frontier.

Analytical writing on how America has mythologised its history of frontier expansion is extensive. Opening up the West was an ‘errand into the wilderness’ which realised the Puritan sense of spiritual mission, and inspired America’s exceptionalist self-belief: ‘the unspoiled grandeur of America helped men believe that here the Giver of values spoke to man more directly’.⁹¹ The West presented symbols and myths, not least that its desert would become ‘the Garden of the World’, which drove America’s ‘purposive group behaviour [through] images which simultaneously express collective desires and impose coherence on the [...] infinitely varied data of experience’.⁹² It translated a ‘foundational ritual’ into popular culture: the Western film and novel with ‘its resolution of the conflict between civilisation and savagery [...] presents for our renewed contemplation that epic moment when the frontier passed from the old way of life into social and cultural forms directly connected with the present’.⁹³

By opening up a New Frontier in 1960 therefore Kennedy was deliberately channelling myth *back* into contemporary American political life, and importing many of its unresolved contradictions. Kennedy’s ‘new world in the west’ reinvigorated the notion of Manifest Destiny: the idea, coined during the 1840s advance into California and Texas, that national expansion was ordained and inevitable. The enlightened idea however that Americans

of revision see: Robert J. McKeever, ‘American Myths and the Impact of the Vietnam War’, in *Vietnam Images*, ed. by Jeffrey Walsh and James Aulich (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp.43-56.

⁹⁰ Hodgson, p.16. Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p.1.

⁹¹ See Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956). Boorstin, *American Politics*, p.27. See also Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation* (London: Heinemann, 1964).

⁹² Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p.ix.

⁹³ John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1984), p.100.

continued to carry 'a beacon light to a world in darkness' writes Hietala, also revived 'the convenient myth of a vacant continent [that the] chosen people had transformed from savagery to civilisation during their predestined march to the Pacific', a conviction that American space, or even empire, did not necessarily stop at the country's physical borders.⁹⁴ Kennedy's invocation of 'hopes and threats' meanwhile mythologised a good vs evil notion of civilisation confronting a threatening 'other', Vietnamese communists for example as Indians. 'The Myth of the Frontier', writes Slotkin, infers 'the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation and displacement of the Native Americans [as] the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and "progressive" civilisation'.⁹⁵ And all this was grounded in Kennedy's appeal to popular culture. 'The "Frontier" was [for Kennedy's campaign team] a complexly resonant symbol, a vivid and memorable set of hero-tales – each a model of successful and morally justifying action on the stage of historical conflict'.⁹⁶

But the frontier narrative was already more ambiguous than Kennedy asserted. From the emergence, in Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s, of the so-called Antinomian Controversy which questioned the moral exceptionalism of the Puritan 'errand', Americans had struggled with a conflict between perceived mythical destiny and historical experience.

On the one side, there was the conviction – articulated by Emerson among others – that the West was God's country, a transcendent site of human perfectibility where 'standing on the bare ground – my head bathed in the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space – all man's egotism vanishes [...] the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me'.⁹⁷ That breathless idealism would mythologise the early pioneer into the eventual cowboy hero 'blessed in his new land, who was unique in his innocence and virtue, who held in his calloused hand the fate of the race'.⁹⁸ And the political myth of the frontier was largely a product of these providential beliefs. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner pondered western expansion's impact on American identity and argued that 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' inhered in 'the meeting point between savagery and civilisation' which had produced, in the complex interchange between settler and Indian, a distinctive and evolving form of 'social development': 'this perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion

⁹⁴ Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p.257,132.

⁹⁵ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), p.10.

⁹⁶ Slotkin, p.3.

⁹⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature', in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, Addresses and Lectures* (New York: Fireside Edition, 1909), pp.13-80 (p.16). Electronic Edition: Online Library of Liberty. See also Bercovitch, pp.163-174.

⁹⁸ Baritz, *City on a Hill*, p.101.

westward with its new opportunities [...] furnish the forces dominating America character'.⁹⁹ Turner worried that the then imminent closure of the frontier would halt the narrative of 'rapid and effective Americanization' and interrupt the 'the rise of democracy as an effective force in the nation'.¹⁰⁰ It was this frontier dynamic Kennedy sought to revive.

On the other side, as Slotkin has notably observed, this myth of national progress predicated on virtue and benign co-operation ignores history. 'Violence', he writes, 'is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation'.¹⁰¹ So perceived, the American character is built on conflict, on the armed revolt against colonial masters, on slavery and, at the frontier, on a series of 'savage wars' that sought to displace the natives. In this darker narrative, the noble farmer jostles with the advancing capitalist entrepreneur promoted by President Andrew Jackson and violent expansion is translated by, among others, Theodore Roosevelt into a myth of the cowboy and Indian fighter as the evolutionary victor in a 'West [as] Darwinian arena in which "races" representing different phases or principles of social organisation contend for *mastery*'.¹⁰²

By the late 60s, the contradictions inside the frontier myth were being played out in Vietnam. As Hellmann points out the project to combat communism began with heroic ambitions for the Green Berets who represented 'a rebirth of America's central mythic hero'.¹⁰³ And the language of the hero-tale Western would resonate through the decade: rural Vietnam was 'Indian country'; Nixon would invoke a cowboy B-movie morality in the face of urban unrest, 'I wonder why it is that the Western survives year after year? Perhaps one of the reasons [...] is that the good guys come out ahead in the Westerns; the bad guys lose'.¹⁰⁴ The massacre at My Lai however reminded Americans that its frontier conflicts were darkly savage affairs and in doing so signalled 'an appalling, indeed frightening deterioration in [America's] national standards of morality and law'.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (London: Penguin, 2008), pp.3,2.

¹⁰⁰ Turner, pp.4,31.

¹⁰¹ Slotkin, p.11.

¹⁰² Slotkin, p.39.

¹⁰³ John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.46.

¹⁰⁴ Richard M. Nixon, 'Remarks to Newsmen in Denver, Colorado, 3 August 1970', in *APP* [accessed 18 July 2012]

¹⁰⁵ Slotkin, p.581.

1.2.3. The Myth of Success.

Exceptionalist perceptions of morality and politics, and frontier notions of geopolitical assertiveness combined and materialised, in individual terms, in the American myth of success. 'The idea of success was a force which drove men on to build America' writes Richard Huber.¹⁰⁶ The pursuit of affluence was a sign of national distinctiveness where 'the vital roots of the American spirit are either the building of a fortune or the building of a reputation which makes you held in esteem by your neighbours' (Laski) and where 'Americanism [becomes a] religion [whose] central doctrine was the idea of individual achievement free from class origins' (Bell).¹⁰⁷ The sense meanwhile that American landscape offered, in De Tocqueville's words, 'an immense booty to the Americans', inspired a form of democracy predicated on access to abundance where 'liberty' and 'equality', Potter argues, meant 'freedom to grasp opportunity' and where, Lipset suggests, Americans had little need for socialism to politicise access to scarce resources.¹⁰⁸ During the Nixon Years however, it was a heightened sensitivity to the eventual contradictions inside the myth of success – as 60s affluence encountered the historical fact of global recession in the 70s – that contributed to the mood of crisis this thesis explores.

The narrative which lionised American achievement had always been sensitive to the risks of overreach. The Massachusetts Bay settlers recognised that the providential duty to benefit from their new nation – 'the puritan viewed material success as a sign of the diligent performance of the callings which God assigned to all men' – required a level of spiritual caution.¹⁰⁹ Peter Bulkeley, one of the first Bay ministers, warned the exceptionalist covenant would be jeopardised by the pursuit of success alone: 'take heed lest [...] being now as a city upon a hill, which many seek unto, thou be left like a beacon upon the top of a mountain, desolate and forsaken'.¹¹⁰ Benjamin Franklin popularised this notion of New World success predicated on modest reserve by proclaiming, as folk image, his arrival at a 'state of affluence and some degree of reputation' on the basis of thirteen virtues which placed 'industry' at the heart of a 'bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection', and by then advising

¹⁰⁶ Richard M. Huber, *The American Idea of Success* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1971), p.10. See also Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Ralph Barton Perry, *Characteristically American* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949).

¹⁰⁷ Harold Laski, *The American Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2014), p.41. Bell, 'End of American Exceptionalism', p.207. See also 'Preface' in Shafer, pp.v-xi (p.vi).

¹⁰⁸ David M. Potter, *People of Plenty* (London: Phoenix Books, 1958), p.92. Lipset, *The First New Nation*, p.178.

¹⁰⁹ Weiss, p.27.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Baritz, *City on a Hill*, p.49

others to follow in America's first business manual, *The Way of Wealth* (1758).¹¹¹

At the same time however, as Lindberg has observed, 'the myth of the "New World" [infers] a freshened sense of opportunity [which makes] many Americans restless, unstable, thirsty for novelty'.¹¹² The determination to succeed risks Americans becoming – or falling victim to – confidence men and tricksters. Lindberg highlights the showman P.T. Barnum and the fictional Simon Suggs – 'It is good to be shifty in a new country' – as examples of a culture, particularly after the Civil War, where 'everyone is trying to make it by self-promotion and gamesmanship' and where American fluidity is exploited with 'little inward pretension of goodness or piety'.¹¹³ Tellingly, Lindberg extends this analysis to a Nixon campaign manual from 1968: 'campaigning is symbolic, i.e. it is not what the candidate actually does as much as what it appears he does'.¹¹⁴

This volatility inside the success myth registered – at key points in U.S. history – as a popular cultural (and often political) determination to maintain foundational ideals, often in the face of contesting historical circumstances. Horatio Alger's stories of rags-to-riches, like *Ragged Dick* (1868) for example, promoted a success dream built on 'patient and virtuous reserve' during a late nineteenth century Gilded Age of accelerating commercial expansion.¹¹⁵ This was a time when some Americans worried about 'mammoth fortunes and the general decline in morals' and about, what Boorstin describes as, 'go-getters': latter-day frontiersmen like John D. Rockefeller 'who went in search of what others had never imagined was there to get' and, in the case of Rockefeller's Standard Oil, constructed powerful conglomerates by exploiting a 'moral-legal ambiguity that flourished beyond precedent in America', especially in its 'Western wilderness'.¹¹⁶ And when, in 1929, President Coolidge's 'new heaven and new earth' of go-getting American capital crashed on Black Thursday, 24 October, Roosevelt based his subsequent 'New Deal' recovery on a return to foundational values: 'the old and permanently important manifestation of the American spirit of the pioneer' in the face of 'the

¹¹¹ Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 1793), pp.xx,132. Adobe Digital Edition.

¹¹² Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp.4,5.

¹¹³ Lindberg, pp.5,184,185.

¹¹⁴ Lindberg, p.233.

¹¹⁵ Weiss, p.59.

¹¹⁶ Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble, *The Free and the Unfree: A New History of the United States* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.259. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), pp.3,51.

falsity of material wealth as the standard of success [and] the mad chase for evanescent profits' that had provoked the Crash in the first place.¹¹⁷

America's uneasiness inside the myth of success – nation-building adventure tussling with spiritual, ethical and political caution – became especially intense during the dispensation covered by this thesis. In some respects, the 60s were another Gilded Age. Gross national product doubled thanks to Kennedy's tax stimuli.¹¹⁸ The Dow Index hit 1000 for the first time in 1966. Household incomes rose by a third in real terms between 1960 and 1970.¹¹⁹ At the same time however some observers were becoming increasingly anxious about the cultural effect of America's pursuit of affluence. Galbraith famously worried about 'the identification of goods with happiness' and argued that the satisfaction of private consumer desire had led to public squalor.¹²⁰ Harrington wrote of *The Other America* where a 'vicious cycle of poverty' for 30% of the U.S. population was the product of institutionalised affluence for the rest.¹²¹ Reviewing a number of these writers, Horowitz concludes that by the early 70s America was experiencing a 'new moralism' amidst concerns that 'abundance was producing social corruption and excessive self-regard'.¹²² The 70s recession, Horowitz adds, 'restored among millions of Americans a sense of limits to what they could expect as consumers'.¹²³

Even before Vietnam, '68 and the OPEC Crisis, Richard Hofstadter described a fragility in America's sense of itself: 'it has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one'.¹²⁴ A nation built solely on values-laden myths, Hofstadter seemed to suggest, was already a vulnerable one. By the 1980s, after Reagan's re-invocation of the 'City Upon a Hill', Baudrillard would describe a post-Vietnam America that had retreated entirely into its exceptionalist illusions: 'America is neither dream nor reality, it is a hyperreality because it is a Utopia that has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved'.¹²⁵

Some commentators on American postmodernist fiction have speculated on how its strategies – beyond formalist opposition alone – inscribed this distinctive destabilisation in

¹¹⁷ Coolidge quoted in Carroll and Noble, p.335. Franklin D. Roosevelt, 'Inaugural Address, 4 March 1933' in *APP* [accessed 12 July 2015]

¹¹⁸ David Farber and Beth Bailey, *The Columbia Guide to America in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p.355.

¹¹⁹ US Bureau of Labour Statistics < <http://www.bls.gov> > [accessed 12 July 2016]

¹²⁰ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p.350.

¹²¹ Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p.15.

¹²² Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), p.203.

¹²³ Horowitz, p.203.

¹²⁴ Quoted in Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, p.18.

¹²⁵ Baudrillard, *America*, p.28.

how America conceived of its mythical, and historical, narratives. Tanner for example, writing as some of the key works of the Nixon Years first emerged, detected a tension between an impulse to explore a foundational sense of freedom in a 'fantastic embroidery' of language which challenged controls and inherited conventions, and a concern that 'by living too much in language you may cut yourself off from direct contact with reality'.¹²⁶ Later Scholes, noting an American tendency to find 'myth [...] stronger than reality', would suggest there was political resonance in extravagant fabulations like *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and *The Public Burning* (1977) in that they offered 'atonement for the guilt of having created a fabulation and pretended it was real'.¹²⁷ Overall, however, as Huyssen suggests, commentary has inclined towards 'emphatically privileg[-ing] aesthetic innovation and experiment' in American postmodernism and, in doing so, has 'purge[-d] life, reality, history, society from the work of art and its reception'.¹²⁸

Here I will seek to recover the 'life' of Nixon Years postmodernist writing by returning its emerging aesthetic innovations to their immediate social and political circumstances. I will argue that, when refracted through the periodic promotion of American mythology, and the periodic volatilities that contested the eventual legitimacy of those already unstable mythologies, the U.S. fiction of the late 60s and early 70s assumes a political character, and a level of intervention into adjacent 'realities', that criticism has hitherto underplayed.

1.3. Methodology

My argument proceeds on the assumption that American postmodernist writing does not necessarily *declare* its politics, nor indeed openly enunciate theoretical or polemical postures. Rather, social and political conditions are registered as 'absent causes', energising circuits of reference in the texts' ostensive content and conditioning the forms texts adopt. To that extent, my interpretive methodology owes something to the influence of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981). That is to say I regard the texts discussed here as 'socially symbolic acts' where 'the production of aesthetic form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right' and where the business of interpretation is about 'restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of [...] fundamental history'.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Tony Tanner, *City of Words* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p.28.

¹²⁷ Scholes, *Fabulation*, p.209.

¹²⁸ Huyssen, p.38.

¹²⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.5,64,4.

Jameson's stated aim is to reassert the 'original urgency' in texts from the past by perceiving the continuities in a 'single great collective story' which links them to the political concerns of the present.¹³⁰ In this, narrative fictions in particular are seen as 'allegorical model[s] of society as a whole' in the historical period whence they originated, and as 'mediating' an underlying 'social ground' into the text's configurations.¹³¹ Interpretation, Jameson argues, requires reading a text from the perspective of a 'master narrative' which is capable of 'rewriting' it so as to bring out social, historical and political concerns that may be repressed inside it, thereby 'respecting the specificity and radical difference of the [text's] social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day'.¹³²

Jameson's compelling interpretive principle of historicising his object of study however risks responding inadequately to the particular challenges of the experimental fictions under analysis here. In the case of postmodernist art, Jameson's own privileged 'master narrative' – the Marxist philosophy of history and of the class struggle which, he argues, is an 'untranscendable horizon', uniquely capable of addressing the 'totality' of underlying social and political conditions – assumes all artefacts are solely characterised by their relation to issues of economic production, here late capitalism. They fragment and become 'depthless' in the process of mediating the 'dehumanisation [in] social relations', and the impulse towards commodification, which underscores the conditions of post-war global trade and exchange. Jameson's positioning of postmodernist art forms as products of the grand sweep of a favoured theory of economic and social history however risks denying individual works a criticality and a distinctiveness that a different view of salient historical conditions, or more focused historical specificities, might return to them. This is perhaps an especially relevant issue when many of the works themselves actively contest the very principle of 'master narratives' that Jameson relies upon.

My own methodology therefore takes a more granular view of the historical conditions that are mediated into my objects of study and responds to the dynamics that, ironically perhaps, Jameson himself distinguished as 'periodising the sixties': a dispensation which began with 'an immense freeing or unbinding of social energies' but which culminated, in the early 70s, in 'powerful restorations of the social order and the renewal of the repressive power of [...] state apparatuses'.¹³³ Here, the particular 'social ground' is an immediate, and nationally

¹³⁰ Jameson, *Unconscious*, p.3.

¹³¹ Jameson, *Unconscious*, pp.18,24.

¹³² Jameson, *Unconscious*, pp.19,x,35.

¹³³ Fredric Jameson, 'Periodising the 60s', *Social Text*, 9/10 (1984), 178-209 (p.208).

specific, turbulence which arises from a collision between a periodic privileging of providential American myths and the disorientating contingency of historical events. This contestation between myth and history represents the principal 'absent cause' whose urgent challenges are mediated into textual form and ostensive content. If there is a 'master narrative' in my reading of American postmodernist writing, it is – in a turn-of-the-decade U.S. where cherished foundational stories were assaulted by war, unrest and recession – the struggle, articulated in its forms, to *hold onto* a narrative.

In an analysis predicated on close reading, I will pay particular attention to the circuits of contemporary reference, with popular culture at their centre, which weave through my case studies. Here, I depart again from Jameson, who sees popular culture as late capitalism's uncritical fellow traveller and its incorporation into films like *American Graffiti* (1973) for example as pastiche: commodified style supplanting historicity in stimulating a depthless nostalgia for a 'mesmerizing lost reality'.¹³⁴ I depart also from critics like Stevick who see the aggregation of reference as background noise, 'floating junk [...] dreck', not as an active player in postmodernist texts.¹³⁵ Rather, I will read invocations of popular culture as formally distinctive sites where repressed conditions – and unacknowledged contestations – are brought to the surface: where a popular cultural reliance on prevailing tastes and mythical assumptions explicitly collides with the contingent circumstances into which it inserts itself. The films Americans watch, the public figures they lionise, even the fast-food and trademarks they consume, percolate through the texts discussed here. I will suggest there is a political urgency in how each writer suspends contemporary popular cultural manifestations inside a critical matrix which exposes their connection to a wider climate of political and ideological myth-making, and restores a historical perspective to their otherwise unchallenged, and already unstable, mythical assumptions.

Chapters two through four of this thesis will divide my overall argument about the formal mediation, and political resonance, of the interplay between myth and history into a series of separately defined mythical and formal analyses. Each chapter will focus on a particular writer's privileging of a particular American mythology, and on their distinctive formal means for addressing its contestations. Chapter five will seek to *politically* reposition Barthelme's encyclopaedic richness in light of what the earlier case studies have to suggest about how emergent postmodernist forms confront America's contemporary realities.

¹³⁴ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p.19 (See also 279-296).

¹³⁵ Philip Stevick, *Alternative Pleasures: Postrealist Fiction and the Tradition* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p.123.

Chapter two will offer the first detailed reading of three Nixon Years novels by Irvin Faust. Nominally stories of individual psychotic breakdown, they articulate I will argue a series of repressed responses to the war in Vietnam, a history they barely mention but which represents an 'absent cause' in their accounts of contemporary disorientation. Faust invokes Vietnam by exploring the American myth of exceptionalism, refracting the changing perceptions of the war through a series of historical proxies. The exhilaration after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis encodes the national confidence that attended Kennedy's first dispatch of Green Berets, for example; Nixon's 1972 trip to China, to reassert America's global prestige, becomes an unstable correlative for a desperate process of wider mythical renewal as America's humiliation in Vietnam became increasingly pronounced. In this, Faust's deployment of metafictional techniques suggests itself as a politically necessary means for critically disentangling America's contemporary impulse towards mythical exceptionalist thinking from the historical realities that contest it. Instead of deploying historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon might argue, to analyse the constructions of history in general, Faust uses metafiction to draw out the particular political deceits which cast the complexities, jeopardies and ultimate failures of America's South East Asian adventure inside a foundational myth, or fiction, of distinctive national purpose.

Chapter three will examine three journeys, in the novels of Rudolph Wurlitzer, into a series of 'alternative Americas', ontological zones where the contemporary accretions of national life are stripped back to a primal rawness. These zones, I will argue, represent formal and political spaces for interrogating the myth of the frontier as invoked by Kennedy in 1960, and as the prospect of new national opportunity descended into unrest and division during the Nixon Years. In a series of latter day errands into the western wilderness, Wurlitzer brings to the surface historical tensions and contradictions inside the frontier myth that 60s popular and political culture sought to repress: the assertion, for example, that confronting 'savagery' at the early frontier's edge was a triumph of civilisation, rather than the exercise of violence. Wurlitzer's zones capture aspects of the mythical odysseys proposed by Fiedler, and the ontological reconfiguration proposed by McHale, but are less zones of escape than formal responses to the political imperative to confront an ideology of renewed national destiny that was predicated on the politicisation of American space itself.

The myth of success underpins chapter four's analysis of two Nixon Years novels by Stanley Elkin. Here I will argue that Elkin's rhetorical extravagances mediate a near-religious American zeal for acquisition and achievement, while the bizarre fabulations that overflow his nominal plot-lines express contestations inside the myth of success which position his novels

as postmodern parables. They represent urgently contemporary iterations of an historic American debate between material achievement and Puritan moral reserve as conflicting and unresolved projects inside the myth of new world opportunity. In charting America's historical transition from a climate of affluent consensus, which underscored the progressive optimism of the early 60s, to the recessionary retrenchments of the 70s, Elkin brings to the surface the anxieties, and historic potential for overreach, repressed inside a mythical narrative which conjoins exceptionalism with the opportunities of physical space to deliver a sense of national birthright.

While each of these chapters distinguishes particular myths and particular formal strategies, they also acknowledge points of cross-over. Faust and Elkin also take their characters into ontologically re-imagined versions of the American West; Wurlitzer's fluid countercultural narrators also channel notions of American distinctiveness and entitlement. To that extent, my accounts of individual writers build towards an overall sense of how mythical thinking's salience, and its collisions with history, are mediated into Nixon Years postmodernism's emergent forms. Whether that perspective can politically reframe the reading of American postmodernist writing *more widely* is an argument broached in chapter five.

In my fifth chapter, I examine how Donald Barthelme, as a canonical and exemplary American postmodernist, might be read when his work is refracted through the ideas and strategies discussed in the preceding chapters. Three notable short stories will be analysed for the degree to which their discrete deployments of postmodernist form – fragmentation, world-building, metafiction – are deployed to conjoin myth and history into sites of contemporary political critique. Barthelme's novels of the Nixon Years, *Snow White* and *The Dead Father*, will then be read as grand mediations of mythical thinking, where rich circuits of mythical and contemporary reference contain and express pivotal changes in the political temperature of 60s and 70s America: the 'breaks' which Jameson sees in the chaos and emerging recessionary reserve of 1967, and the eventual recession and revolutionary exhaustion of 1972-4.¹³⁶ In the frustrated optimism of *Show White*, and the wide-ranging recursions of *The Dead Father*, I will suggest, Barthelme delivers accounts *writ large* of the underlying contested mythical politics of the Nixon Years.

In some respects, this thesis might be read as a series of interlocking accounts of how an emerging literature mediated, and intervened into, the rapid political changes of the American

¹³⁶ Jameson, 'Periodising the 60s', pp.204-209.

60s and 70s, with Barthelme's 1975 *The Dead Father* as an ultimate distillation of the formal innovations and mythical/historical contestations that came before. That journey starts, however, in 1966 with Faust's *The Steagle* and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Chapter Two

Irvin Faust and American Popular Culture: The Myth of Exceptionalism Unravelled

Irvin Faust said in 1991: 'it is my conviction that we perform, relate, understand and often live and die according to the artefacts and phenomena of our culture'.¹ Faust's major novels of the Nixon Years are certainly distinguished by their swirling allusions to American popular culture, and by their disorientated protagonists seeking reassurance inside popular narratives, communal histories and cherished national mythologies. References to MGM's Andy Hardy movies, and to New York baseball, percolate through *The Steagle* (1966), Faust's account of fugitive college professor Harold Weissburg's existential emergency during The Cuban Missile Crisis. The garrulous Willy Kleinhans in *Willy Remembers* (1971) struggles to separate his experience as an infantryman in the Spanish-American War from the conflict's subsequent valorisation in the yellow journalism of Richard Harding Davis and the political spin of Teddy Roosevelt. And in *Foreign Devils* (1973), blocked writer Sidney Birnbaum refracts Nixon's 1972 trip to China through Hollywood movies like *The Bitter Tears of General Yen* (1933), before casting himself in a sensationalist pulp (meta-) fiction about a daring American reporter defying the anti-western Boxer Rebellion in turn-of-the-century Beijing.

Ultimately however Faust's dense aggregations of popular cultural reference are less sites of refuge, where his anxious Americans can simply escape the fragmenting intensities of postmodern culture, than they are highly-charged sites of political criticality. Here American myths of national destiny and the contending realities of American historical experience collide and tussle to diagnose and intervene into a disconcerting American political present. As such, the novels inscribe, and animate, America's increasingly anxious debate, during the 60s and 70s, over the historical basis, and sustainability, of its own foundational myth of exceptionalism. Intervening into the transition from the expansive John F. Kennedy to the beleaguered Richard Nixon, from the heady aftermath of the Cuban Crisis to the enervating stalemate of Vietnam and beyond, Faust unravels the corrosive contradictions – the *living and dying* – inside a popular mythology that was invoked to revitalise the American narrative but where an uncritical subscription to its assertions culminated, as the 60s ended, in crisis: huge fatalities in Vietnam, students killed at U.S. universities, a moribund economy, a 'culture [...] schizophrenically divided against itself'.²

¹ Irvin Faust, 'Irvin Faust on his Novels', in *American Writing Today*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz (Troy, NY: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1991), pp.212-219 (p.213).

² Jay Martin, 'A Watertight Watergate Future: Americans in a Post-American Age', *Antioch Review*, 33 (1975), 6-25 (p.8).

The Steagle traces America's aggressive self-confidence over South East Asia back to the fragile mixture of relief and reinforced national belief that followed the 1962 nuclear stand-off in the Caribbean. America's first exceptionalist global adventure, the 1898 Spanish-American War, becomes in *Willy Remembers* the wellspring for what Henry Luce would call 'the American Century' but emerges also as an eerie precursor to, and proxy for, the delusions that escalated in Vietnam. And during Vietnam's humiliating endgame, *Foreign Devils* imagines a romantic history where American power overcame, rather than succumbed to, an oriental insurgency. Together, Faust's novels confront Luce's exceptionalist proposition that America should become 'the powerhouse from which the ideals spread throughout the world and do their mysterious work of lifting the life of mankind from the level of the beasts to what the Psalmist called a little lower than the angels'.³

Exceptionalism is the first of the grand American narratives under scrutiny in this thesis. This chapter will explore how Faust's three major novels of the Nixon Years deploy the volatile conversation – or argument – between privileged myth and historical complexity in three different ways to sequentially track, and diagnose, an American descent into crisis. From the uncritical absorption of history into a mythically-charged project of national self-assertion in *The Steagle*, via the cognitive dissonance of a failure to register the deceits of myth and the lessons of history in *Willy Remembers*, and then on in *Foreign Devils* to the uneasy manufacture of an idealised-history-that-never-was to offset the disorientations of myth's failure: Faust's postmodernist activism emerges from his critical, metafictional engagement with a 60s and 70s America that was sidestepping the destabilising contradictions in the destiny it was imagining for itself.

2.1. Locating Irvin Faust.

Commentary on Faust is largely confined to short press reviews, and obituaries: he died in 2012. In each instance, his novels are seen as adjuncts to existing literary traditions as opposed to what might ultimately qualify them for inclusion in the argument here: as experimental fictions which navigate, and critique, the complexities of Nixon Years American politics and which, in doing so, realise strategies that might define the distinctive political character of an emerging American postmodernism.

Reviewing *The Steagle* in 1966, for example, Webster Schott suggested the protagonist was experiencing a 'nervous breakdown' and hearing 'cryptic Herzogian

³ Henry Luce, 'The American Century', *Life Magazine*, 17 February 1941, p.65.

messages', thereby joining Malamud's Seymour Levin and Bellow's Moses Herzog in a contemporary lineage of Jewish neurotics.⁴ The novel's concern with nuclear destruction, Schott argued, aligned it with the black humour by which critics had sought to categorise Vonnegut and Pynchon: 'it curves upward from black humour to what can only be called black nostalgia; to escape the present "crashing thunderbolt age" it seeks momentary respite in simple, pre-bomb Americana'. Its episodic structure meanwhile was rooted in Joyce's high modernism, a 'Ulyssean tour on a Diner's Club card'.

The putative influence of Joyce was felt also in *Willy Remembers*: a 'Joycean complexity of ambivalences, portmanteau images and concentric legends' announced *The New York Times Book Review* in 1971.⁵ In 1973 *The Massachusetts Review* saw *Foreign Devils* as a late modernist rendering of psychological complexity, taking us "'inside" someone suffering at least mildly from schizophrenia'.⁶ And on Faust's death, *The New York Times* summarised his output as dealing 'with the consequences of putting faith in fantasies'.⁷

Faust's commentators throughout seem agreed that he was more concerned with aberrance of character and seductive fantasy than grappling with topical events or politics. Indeed, Faust's most enthusiastic observer, Richard Kostelanetz, explicitly lamented a 'failure to integrate public disturbance with private troubles' and read the Nixon Years novels as accounts of individual psychosis.⁸ *The Steagle*, Kostelanetz argued, is 'the most perceptive and sustained portrait of a psychotic breakdown in all novelistic literature' where topical and popular cultural references are subsumed into a confused pathology which 'successfully distort[s] the lines between fantasy and reality [so] that one is never sure whether a certain action takes place in dream or in fact'.⁹

These verdicts however underplay the extent to which Faust's work is not only alive to events in his contemporary America, but also develops strategies for identifying the political jeopardy inside those events' concatenations of mythical and historical meaning. His characters are not simply latter-day Walter Mittys. Rather, they are buffeted by topical incident and resonate to emerging political discourses. The deployment of Green Berets in

⁴ Webster Schott, 'Wild Ride to Black Nostalgia', *Life*, 22 July 1966, p.13.

⁵ R.V. Cassill, 'Willy Remembers', *New York Times Book Review*, 29 August 1971 < <http://www.nytimes.com> > [accessed 16 July 2017]

⁶ Roger Sale, 'American Fiction in 1973', *The Massachusetts Review*, 14 (1973), 834-46 (p.835).

⁷ Webster Schott quoted in Douglas Martin, 'Irvin Faust, Author and Guidance Counselor, Dies at 88', *New York Times Book Review*, 30 July 2012 < <http://www.nytimes.com> > [accessed 16 July 2017]

⁸ Richard Kostelanetz, 'Irvin Faust', in *Contemporary Jewish-American Novelists: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*, ed. by Joel Shatzky and Michael Taub (Westport, CN: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997), pp.87-91 (p.88).

⁹ Richard Kostelanetz, 'American Literature, 1965-1969', in *On Contemporary Literature*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Avon Books, 1969), pp.634-653 (p.644).

Vietnam, the urban riots in Harlem and Watts, the massacre at My Lai: Faust's dense and restless prose alludes to them all, and more. The Andy Hardy figure whose identity Weissburg adopts in *The Steagle* has not escaped into the nostalgic safety of 'pre-bomb Americana', but is poised instead to project hometown values into 'all the big trouble spots in the world. Berlin, Vietnam, *Cuba*'.¹⁰ Willy Kleinhans' memorial blend of myth and bellicose historical precedent dovetails directly into the notions of exceptionalist destiny, of 'plung[-ing] America into world powership', that drove U.S. foreign policy during the Kennedy and Nixon administrations.¹¹ Faust's fantasies are less zones of escape than sites where America's past performances and future objectives collide.

To the extent, meanwhile, that Faust's characters' pasts-as-experienced, anxious presents and desired futures are conjoined inside 'concentric legends', his privileged myth of exceptionalism presides simultaneously over a disorientating amalgam of existential reassurance and corrosive delusion. Mythically-charged narratives of the past – like the moral conviction surrounding America's 1898 war against Spain – are destabilised by the experience of actual events. Developments in the present – like the escalation in Vietnam – driven by exceptionalist narratives from the past, are themselves destabilised by unacknowledged historical fault-lines. Where Joyce deployed a mythological system as a modernist site of aesthetic organisation to give 'a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history', Faust deploys America's mythical thinking in the 1960s to explore a postmodernist field of fracture, where myth infers jeopardy even as it is deployed to legitimise contemporary policy.¹²

That sense of fracture feeds into Faust's distinctive deployment of metafiction. His protagonists – anxious academics, determined yarn-spinners, writers in sudden spate – relentlessly self-commentate. But no attempt at narrative coherence can avoid tripping over the contradictions of awkward historical facts. And no attempt at conveying complexity, present or historical, can entirely resist being implicated in desired mythical trajectories. Where some novelists, Barth for example, deploy metafiction to self-consciously pronounce upon fiction's own constructedness and others, according to Brooke-Rose, to so 'parody [...] interpretation [as to] dramatise the *theme* of the world's non-interpretability', Faust deploys metafictional techniques to explore what is ultimately a battle for control of the American narrative in the politics of the 60s and 70s.¹³

¹⁰ Irvin Faust, *The Steagle* (New York: Random House, 1966), p.146. Hereafter *ST*.

¹¹ Irvin Faust, *Willy Remembers* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), p.88. Hereafter *WR*.

¹² T.S.Eliot, 'Ulysses', Order and Myth', in *Selected Prose of T.S.Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), pp.175-178 (p.177).

¹³ Brooke-Rose, p.364.

In this, Vietnam is the signal crisis event in three novels, over seven years, which articulate a changing balance between historical reality and mythical aspiration in the construction of contemporary popular perception, and political decision-making: from the escalation after Tonkin, through to the disillusion post-Tet, and on to Nixon's election-winning trip to China. The Spanish-American conflict is characterised, in *Willy Remembers*, as a 'neat little war' whose exceptionalist affirmation becomes an ironic precursor to an Asian adventure, seventy years later, that was anything but (WR 215). Nixon's re-assertion in Beijing of post-Vietnam national prestige is problematized in *Foreign Devils* by an anxious protagonist who himself seeks to recover prestige by writing himself into a sensationalist history of American power projection in China at the start of the American century.

In what follows, Faust's debut novel *The Steagle* will be examined in detail for the extent to which it lays the ground-rules for the author's postmodernist strategies: a fusion of dense popular cultural allusion and metafictional self-consciousness which analyses and contests the persistent attractions and political content of popular American narratives which are themselves already volatile amalgams of myth and history. *Willy Remembers* and *Foreign Devils* will be subsequently examined for the degrees to which their specific meditations on exceptionalism and their differing mediations between valorised past and disorientating present track and deepen a sense of turn-of-the-decade crisis.

2.2. The Steagle.

The ostensive subject of *The Steagle* is one man's desperate reaction to the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Academic Harold Weissburg travels westward, from New York to Hollywood, on a last spree against the threat of nuclear destruction, channelling his private anxieties and public disorientation into a series of picaresque episodes of popular cultural, historical and nostalgic escape.

The specificity of the novel's timeframe however – 20 October to 31 October 1962, the stand-off tick-tocking menacingly in the background – is misleading. Faust is more concerned with what the Cuban Crisis *led to* than with the delimited events of the historical moment itself: a speculation about its impact on America's sense of national purpose from the perspective, just a few years later, when the re-assertion of exceptionalism had committed the U.S. in Vietnam, and when the co-ordinates of a crisis-to-come were already drafting themselves. The novel's title too, a wartime expression for a short-lived phenomenon, is both

misleading and ironic.¹⁴ Just as Cuba transformed American policy beyond the immediate terms of its concluding superpower trade-off, so Weissburg is transformed, rather than returned unscathed, by the myths and narratives to which he refers for reassurance. Faust's novel is less about a specific crisis, than it is a prognosis arising from a root instability in American life, predicated on the very mythologies Americans have traditionally inhabited.

2.2.1. From Cuba to Vietnam.

The Steagle begins and ends on a train to New York. An alienated Harold Weissburg first heads home from an enervating academic conference and then, eleven days of Cuban Crisis later, returns from his cross-country spree to reassert a sense of enthusiasm for an America he feared might be incinerated: 'forget it, forget it, look out, Harold, out, *externalize*; see *America* first. See white church steeple. Weather vane. White. Porches' (ST 203).

Any sense however that Weissburg can indeed 'forget it', or that the nuclear threat has left America any less determined to project its picket-fence vision of itself, is deflected by a salient passage as the train approaches Grand Central in the novel's final pages. A woman passenger approaches Weissburg:

"I saw you reading the paper and saw all those horrible places...."

"Horrible places?"

HOORAY

"Oh India and Vietnam and places like that. And I thought here we are, just finished up with Cuba, and the same thing could start in one of those places [...]. As if this is only the beginning..."

CHOONG

He [Weissburg] stepped closer. "Oh well," he said, "we have to keep going." He smiled. "Don't we?"

She smiled back and shivered slightly.

"Yes we do."

BERLIN? CHOONG

"I think I ought to introduce myself. Since we're neighbours." He held out his hand. "I'm Cave Carson".

She took his hand [...] "What an unusual name, Mr. Carson."

VIETNAM CHOONG (ST 244-5)

The passage displays Faust's characteristic density of reference in a distinctive prose which struggles to aggregate, but cannot ultimately contain the restlessness inside, fragments of allusion. It exemplifies a persistent collapsing-together in the novel of private circuits of

¹⁴ 'Steagle' combines the names of two National Football League teams, the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Philadelphia Eagles, which joined forces in 1943 to offset a manpower shortage.

popular cultural referral and public circuits of mythical belief even as both are destabilised by the intrusive complexities of history and of contemporary events.

The name Weissburg adopts, Cave Carson, is the latest in a series of temporary alter egos – from Great War flying ace to Frank Sinatra's confidant – into which he has slipped on his journey. This one amalgamates Jules Verne fantasy – '*Cave Carson on the Nautilus*' – with Weissburg's auto-insertion into a Hollywood version of American popular history: 'My father was Floyd Collins. You know, the fellow trapped in the cave. They made a film about it with Kirk Douglas. *The Big Cave*' he will add later (ST 241,245). The reference is to the media sensation that surrounded Collins' slow death inside Mammoth Cave Kentucky in February 1925. The movie is actually Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* (1951) with Douglas as the ruthless reporter seeking to re-launch his career by spinning the story of a trapped caver. Critically however the amalgam is as precarious as it is self-promoting. As an incident in American folklore, Mammoth Cave was ultimately an assertion of heroic delusion: Collins died trying to market it to tourists. The movie, whose misremembered title suggests the relentless energy of a narrative refusing to bow to contradiction, ultimately passes critical judgement on the single-minded pursuit of success: Douglas' Chuck Tatum dies as he is about to confess to dooming the caver for the sake of headlines. The consequent equivocation over the story to which Weissburg/Carson claims to be heir colours, in turn, his projection of himself on *The Nautilus*. The escapist Jules Verne reference also invokes America's singular determination to project power: the USS Nautilus was the world's first nuclear-powered submarine, a secret first-strike weapon that characterised Cold War strategy. This intense conversation between popular culture, fragile fantasy, misremembered history and topical reference produces an effect more (geo-)politically resonant than its fragmentary presentation might initially suggest. And the resonance does not end there.

The capitalised eruptions – 'HOORAY', 'CHOONG' – emphasise a fragmentary breakdown in whatever sense of coherence the returning Weissburg is trying to recover for himself, while simultaneously blurring the line between public and private narratives. Is 'BERLIN? CHOONG', for example, Weissburg's internal speculation about where America might involve itself next? Or does the question-mark infer an external agenda-setting voice asking his approval? After all, a confrontation in Berlin was one likely scenario after Cuba and Kennedy would stand before the Wall and announce '*Ich bin ein Berliner*' only a few months later. Does the 'HOORAY' infer the excitement of a sexually anxious professor being approached by a woman, or a response – from somewhere – to the possibility of going to 'horrible places'? And is the onomatopoeic 'CHOONG' some sort of rim-shot pay-off to a joke,

or an explosive reminder of thirteen days of nuclear crisis, and the possibility ‘the same thing could start [again] as if this is only the beginning’?

Cumulatively, grand issues of geopolitics are refracted through fantasy and garbled histories. Topical challenges sit somewhere between breathless excitement and nightmare dread. By the time the writing settles momentarily on ‘VIETNAM CHOONG’, it is unclear whether the Asian intervention is to be welcomed or feared, and whether it will eventuate in an explosion or a joke, or both.

What is certain is that, by the time *The Steagle* was published, Vietnam was no longer just one in a list of ‘horrible’ locations where America might involve itself. And by then too Cuba was tightly intertwined with the narrative of exceptionalist ambition that had crystallised around the foreshortened Kennedy presidency – to ‘oppose any foes, in order to ensure the survival and success of liberty’ – which was now accelerating under Lyndon Johnson in a South Vietnam whose struggle with communism today was perceived to echo America’s own struggle to escape colonial power two centuries before.¹⁵ The resilience of the Vietcong insurgency however and the unreliability of the Saigon government had questioned America’s ability to project power and forced Johnson to escalate: ‘they’re killing our men while they sleep in the night. I can’t ask American soldiers out there to continue with one hand tied behind their backs’.¹⁶ By 1966, there were four hundred thousand U.S. troops in Vietnam, despite Johnson’s pledge not ‘to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves’.¹⁷ Johnson’s political dilemma, inherited from Kennedy – to lead, and contain, a global fight against communism – would exhaust his presidency and increase exceptionalist pressure on his successor: ‘I am not going to be the first American president to lose a war’, Nixon would say in October 1969.

Faust’s novel inserts itself therefore into a period of diminishing confidence in national self-assertion. ‘VIETNAM CHOONG’, its textual irresolvability notwithstanding, would doubtless have read as proposing an eerie continuity from one national crisis to the threatening disintegration of another, all the more so as Harold Weissburg departs the novel in a babble of incoherence, “‘CHOBBOONG. CHOBBOONG. CHOBBOONG””, and gangster-movie-style violence, “‘All right, Louie, drop da gun”” (ST 247).

But the novel is about more than simple hindsight. Rather its sense of exhilarating relief at nuclear survival leading ironically towards delusional failure is located in an analysis, and a destabilisation, of the mythological narratives that underpin both global adventures. As

¹⁵ John F Kennedy, ‘Inaugural Address, 20 January 1961’, in *KPL* [accessed 16 September 2013]

¹⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1971), p.125.

¹⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, ‘Remarks in Memorial Hall, Akron University, 21 October 1964’, in *APP* [accessed 21 March 2015]

the text progresses, as the Soviet ships close on the U.S. blockade and the historical world around the novel's diegesis seems to fracture, so Harold Weissburg's volatile private fantasies of escapist reassurance become increasingly public performances of mythically driven national assertion. And in the metafictional critique inscribed into Weissburg's particularly determined experience of – and emphatic response to – this singular moment of American history, Faust identifies the fault-lines in belief systems which promise geopolitical confidence, but which are shot through with enervating contradictions.

2.2.2. Personal Escapes and Public Narratives.

Weissburg's journey westwards is marked by a pronounced shift in the identities he adopts, and a density in the narratives he promotes. From heroic saviour of New York baseball to all-American movie star and global Cold War warrior, what begins as an anxious expression of individual denial becomes an all-consuming projection of shared beliefs and assertions of national defiance. Here the Cuban stand-off becomes a catalytic site for Faust's examination of the unstable relationship between private fantasy and public mythology. There is, Harold's journey suggests, always a crisis-in-waiting in the delicate linkage between the localised desire to secure America's picket-fences, and the narratives that mediate that desire into grand statements of exceptionalist superiority and assertions of Manifest Destiny.

This section will examine two set piece episodes from early in Harold's journey to illustrate the process of narrative displacement from private to public, and to highlight the tensions that arise as beliefs and mythologies are destabilised, even as they are invoked.

In the first episode, Harold is still in New York, giving a lecture. It is Monday 23 October 1962 and the Cuban Crisis is already part of the intermedial background noise. Kennedy's televised warning about Soviet 'nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere' was the night before and the sense of emergency has begun to infect the entire lecture theatre, and to assault Weissburg's own sense of stability: 'overhead near a crack in the ceiling he saw the ships steaming [towards the Cuban blockade line]' (ST 46-52).¹⁸

The military manoeuvrings translate into a frenzied expression, public and private, of disorientation and denial as the lecture becomes a raucous concatenation of unresolved anxieties, unfulfilled dreams and desperate nostalgia. The title of the lecture meanwhile – 'the mystique of the hero in Elizabethan literature as reflected in existing socio-action terms' – self-consciously frames the ensuing fragments as a self-deluding heroic response to crisis, where a

¹⁸ John F. Kennedy, 'Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Build-Up in Cuba, 22 October 1962', in *KPL* [accessed 8 March 2015]

perceived coherent programme of action is submerged by its own superfluities. In this, Harold displaces his private anxiety into a shared expression of public disquiet as the lecture's ostensive subject – Willie Mays, the black All-Star 'soul and guts' batter with the New York Giants as latter-day Othello – becomes a proxy for the geopolitical threat to America's communal stability: 'the thing I can't understand [...] is why Willie Mays did not get the Most Valuable Player award last year [...] And dammit he won't get it *this year*'.

Faust is not the first writer to invoke baseball, the 'Great American Pastime', as a site of mythical referral.¹⁹ Here however the story of the Giants becomes an emblematic history of America's twentieth century rise to global prominence, refracted through the household names through whom the club's 'legend flowered' – 'the flame was passed on from Big Six to King Carl and Prince Hall and Fat Freddie and Blondie' – and onto 'the shot heard round the world', the celebrated moment when Bobby Thompson hit a pennant-winning home run against the Brooklyn Dodgers in the first-ever televised baseball game in October 1951.²⁰ Weissburg's obsessive history culminates in a desperate cry as he rails against the moment in 1957 when the Giants' move to San Francisco effaced a century-long narrative of New York history, 'AND THEN THEY TOOK THEM AWAY [...] AND I PROTEST'.

Weissburg's particular engagement with baseball tradition becomes a proxy for the perceived nuclear threat to national existence on the one hand, and a privileged site from which American distinctiveness might nonetheless (re-)assert itself on the other. It is an expression of myth facing down history in a determination to secure the exceptionalist progress of the American Century. The situation's urgency and contingency, geopolitical and communal, bomb and baseball-diamond, translate into Weissburg casting himself as the popular hero who will restore continuity. The incommensurability of the situation, however, translates into a simultaneous breakdown in that same self-image as he confronts its contradictions. Thus, as the lecture continues, Weissburg's jeremiad against the nameless powers that are both threatening the country and wrecking its emblematic game, descends into the shrill capitalised street-speak of a frustrated child: 'YOBBOU OBBAND MOBBEE HOBBAVE BOBBEEN COBBONNED, BOBBILKED, SCROBBEWED BOBBYE THOBBEE GROBBEAT SPOBBORTSMOBBEN THOBBAT TOBBOOK OBBOUR CLOBBBOSEOBBEST FROBBIENDS FROBBOM OBBUS' [you and me have been conned, bilked, screwed by the great sportsmen that took our

¹⁹ See, for example, Bernard Malamud, *The Natural* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), where the game is aligned with the legends of Camelot and the Fisher King. See also *Damn Yankees!*, dir. by George Abbot and Stanley Donen (Warner Bros. 1958) where an 'average Joe' signs a pact-with-the-devil to defeat the mightiest team in the U.S.

²⁰ See Frank Graham, *The New York Giants: An Informal History of a Great Baseball Club* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002). Big Six (Christopher Mathewson), King Carl (Carl Hubbell) and Blondie (John Collins Ryan) were among the stars of the World Series winning team of the 1930s.

closest friends from us]. The lecture concludes in a defiant threat that is, in its childish pretence to strength, an expression in itself of frustration in the face of crisis: 'YOBBOU OBBOUT THOBBERE, BROBBING MODDISTOBBER MOBBAYS BOBBACK TOBBOU OBBUS OBBIN THOBBIS SOBBITOBby, OBBAND OBBI SOBBAY FOBBOR OBBALL OBBOF OBBUS THOBBAT DOBBEMBOBBAND THOBBIS, FOBBUCK YOBBOU OBBALL' [you out there, bring Mister Mays back to us in this city, and I say for all of us that demand this, fuck you all].

In what is a characteristic blend of form, where language fragments in an effort to cope, and allusive circuits of reference, where private sites of historical referral segue into communal belief systems, Harold's lecture overflows the topical moment, the approaching Soviet ships, and into a sprawl of contradictions which anticipate the novel's diagnosis of the deeper and more corrosive crisis-to-come. As its call-to-action becomes more shrill, as its narrative becomes more self-consciously determined, so it projects increasing aggression even as it is forced to confront the diminishing logic and sustainability of its own assertions. Baseball, an American shibboleth, becomes the popular cultural rallying-point against a dark threat to U.S. public life, and yet it too is being eroded by incommensurable forces ('you out there'). Language collapses as if to suggest that the belief systems and continuities into which Weissburg sublimates his personal anxieties, and his nationally shared sense of dread, cannot ultimately sustain the faith he places in them.

The sense however that this is a burgeoning *national* crisis and not just a personal one, and that its political implications would resonate beyond the conclusion to the Cuban stand-off, is suggested by the process of transition through the novel's episodes. Here, Weissburg progressively slips into postures which are increasingly *public*, detached from the specificities of his own individual anxieties.

Consider for example the episode in Milwaukee, site of Harold's former World War Two boot camp, on 24 October 1962. Over one night, he transitions from nostalgia to (self-styled) national hero, from private anxiety to putative public action. Recalling an unrequited object of wartime affection, Sally Rudolph, Weissburg breaks into a college dormitory and casts a present-day student as Sally's proxy with himself as Gary Marlowe, a Chanderlesque figure as wise-cracking as his younger self was adolescently tongue-tied:

"Will I ever see you again?" said Miss Sally.

"Never," said Weissburg.

"Oh, I knew it when you came in," said Miss Sally.

"Well," said Weissburg, "the cookie crumbles like that. Say there is one thing."

"Oh, yes," said Miss Sally [...]

"Give me a pair of your goddam panties". (ST 108)

A Hollywood narrative of romantic return to lost love is metafictionally destabilised by Weissburg's self-image as hard-boiled detective.

On the night-time Milwaukee streets however Weissburg's private performance as the glibly self-reliant hero in a great romance that never happened expands into a presentation of himself as national saviour, 'NOBILITY HE FELT, HEROISM, FILLED TO CAPACITY WITH NOBLESSE OBLIGE' (ST 108-111). The capitalisation recalls the prior street-speak, suggests the sloganeering of political or advertising billboards, and contains both childish nostalgia and contemporary myth-making in the self-conscious invocation of a capitalised action sequence in a movie screenplay. It is thus in a form of uncritical celluloid mission that Weissburg sallies out to save the lost souls of Main Street America: 'HE WENT OUT LOOKING FOR [...] THE RAPEE SINKING INTO OBLIVION, FOR BABY NEGRO GIRLS WALKING THE SPLIT GAUNTLET [...] FOR THE HUDDLED INCOHERENTS'. One vagrant becomes a particular focus, an emblem for the forgotten figures who fought to create contemporary America: 'HE WAS A BONUS MARCHER AND THIS WAS A HELLUVA WAY [...] TO TREAT A GASSED VETERAN OF THE GREAT WAR'.²¹

The performance, however, oscillates precariously between an act of exceptionalist selflessness, and an exercise in self-promotion. On the one hand, Weissburg, identified generically as 'THE GIVER', submerges himself into the urgency of national solidarity: 'THE BOMBS ARE GOING TO FALL ANY MINUTE, THIS IS A CRISIS, I KID YOU NOT, SO [...] LET ME REACH WAY DOWN AND HELP.' On the other hand, his help for the derelict is a deliberate act of competitive generosity designed it seems to project himself into a pantheon of headline-making American heroes, 'SPREAD IT AROUND, SPREAD IT BETTER THAN DAISY DAVE, WHO WAS INTERMINABLY KVELLED OVER [...] DAISY DAVE WAS RAOUL LUFBERRY, WILLIAM POWELL, FDR, ARROWSMITH AND JACOB RIIS'.²²

This self-consciously constructed late night excursion is significant in two ways. First there is the movement from personal to public. Weissburg's anxious nostalgia for lost time transitions, via his fantasies, into a mythically-charged public imperative to recover Americans from historical neglect before American history itself is ended by the bomb. The point is underlined by the typography and the explicit use of the detached third person which separate Weissburg the individual from a generalised, emblematic response to collective emergency.

²¹ The Bonus Marchers were veterans of World War One who descended on Washington in 1932. To offset the effects of the Great Depression, they demanded cash in redemption of the bonus certificates they were awarded after military service. Their makeshift camp was burned, and two veterans died, when President Hoover ordered their forced eviction.

²² Lufberry was an American air ace in World War One; William Powell played Dashiell Hammett's detective Nick Charles in *The Thin Man* films; FDR was elected, in part, because Hoover had disgraced himself over the Bonus Marchers; Arrowsmith is the scientist hero who defeats bubonic plague in Upton Sinclair's novel of 1925; Jacob Riis was a journalist who campaigned against the slums of turn-of-the-century New York. 'Daisy Dave' appears to be Weissburg's own shorthand for collective public service.

Second, there is the metafictional foregrounding of a tension within both fantasies which exposes their darkly complex hinterland. The crudeness of the encounter with 'Sally'; the competitiveness that colours the philanthropy of the night-time 'GIVER'; together they erode the nominal purity of American heroism. The pantheon of popular cultural exceptionalist emblems whom Weissburg seeks to channel – film stars, war heroes, crusaders – is ironically compromised by its implication in narratives that cannot escape an aggressive self-regard.

From the perspective of October 1962, this volatile mix of motives might have registered as an understandable short-term reaction to the possibility of imminent destruction. From the perspective of 1966 however, as U.S. headlines spoke of war on two fronts, against poverty at home and communism abroad, it exposes the ambiguities and fault-lines inside systems of American popular belief. The eventual fall-out from Cuba, *The Steagle* suggests, was the degree to which it reinforced narratives of national assertion which always already contained the potential for a deeper existential crisis. This notion is amplified by the insertion of Weissburg's compromised fantasy life into scenarios which invoke the mythology of America's very foundation.

2.2.3. Contestations inside the Exceptionalist Mission.

If one track through *The Steagle's* diagnosis of crisis is the deepening contestations inside the public personae Weissburg adopts, another – resonating outwards into America as a whole – is the novel's complementary track along the trajectory of American foundational history. As Harold travels westward, he is not only fleeing the epicentre of the Cuban stand-off, but following the line of America's frontier expansion as well. To the extent meanwhile that Weissburg's major stops-along-the-way are themselves bywords for escapism – Las Vegas, Los Angeles – the novel effects a correspondence, in both locations, between their immediate status as sites of fantasy, and their historical role in asserting a geographical exceptionalism by advancing the line of civilisation into the wilderness of America's national extremes. The compromised fantasy lives that Weissburg performs in both locations foreground the corrosive ambiguities in the mythology that spurs both Las Vegas' and L.A.'s contemporary contributions to American popular culture, and their historical contribution to America's frontier story of national definition.

That *The Steagle* is ultimately about America as whole, and about the questions circling around its national project in the mid-60s, is suggested by what is perhaps the novel's pivotal episode. It is Friday 26 October 1962, and Weissburg has flown into Las Vegas (ST 117-139). By nightfall, his burgeoning fantasy life will radiate outward to infect, it is inferred, the

very narrative America is constructing for itself. Or rather, *re*-constructing. For the Las Vegas episode is underpinned by a notion of creative destruction wherein the threat of nuclear obliteration creates a newly imagined wilderness, ready to be *re*-mapped by latter-day versions of America's nation-defining mythologies as those mythologies once mapped the frontier in America's historical past.

Thus, as he flies over 'the relief map' of the Nevada Desert, Weissburg imagines himself on the Enola Gay, poised to rain nuclear destruction on Hiroshima, 'CHOONG // On to Nagasaki'. Later he will claim to have been 'in Hiroshima. Right after. First battalion in'. Weissburg's fellow tourists meanwhile are, variously, 'wait[-ing] fatalistically for the missiles' or 'adjusting to the greatest (and possibly last) week of their lives'. The sense that Weissburg is somehow looking forward even as the past is laid waste is echoed in Faust's image of Las Vegas itself, poised precariously it seems between two deserts: the one from which the city emerged in the early 1900s, and the one to which it might return, and have to renegotiate, if the missiles fall. So perceived, the Cuban Crisis emerges as a spur-to-examination amid the threat of destruction; Weissburg and Las Vegas are conjoined in a liminal space where an American future is unfolding in a physical space where the advancing frontier defined it in the past.

The city is, on the one hand, an aggregation of glittering fragments:

Vegas. *Ocean's Eleven*. Sinatra. Judy. Thirty thousand a week. Sun.
Desert. Red Neon. One-armed bandits. Action. *Faites vos jeux. Les jeux
sont faits*. Nothing Monaco. Nothing Miami. Nothing Reno. Pools.
Tanfastic. Bikinis. Action. Vegas.

Popular narratives of celebrity, aspirations to affluence and assertive enterprise combine with intimations of politics (Sinatra entertained Kennedy at The Sands resort) into a jostling gaudiness which, in an expression of American ambitions at their most vivid, projects a notion of exceptionalism-as-material-success. On the other hand, Las Vegas is a frontier town: beyond the Strip is 'the Great American Desert [...] and the handle of the Big Dipper', a still uncharted region of space and time. As an embodiment of what Spanos has suggested is an American drive towards keeping the frontier 'perpetually open, even after the farthest western reaches of the continent had been settled and colonized', Faust's Las Vegas presents as an ontological zone where America is still constructing itself, still exploring some of its most cherished foundational ideas.²³ And that process is refracted by the increasingly frenzied performances of communal belief through which Weissburg is now (re-)constructing himself.

²³ Spanos, *American Exceptionalism*, p.198.

Weissburg's latest alter ego, pilot and adventurer Georges Guynemer, is an amalgam of aspirational, popular cultural and intermedial narratives: he is one of the immigrants ('my father was from Paris') who has travelled west to star in the movies ('I'm on my way to the coast to consult on a remake of *Hell's Angels*'); he is a confidant of Sinatra ('I'm here with Frank') and a celluloid entrepreneur ('We're thinking [...] about *Pride and Prejudice* in a plush east side setting'). Vegas and Weissburg/Guynemer are conjoined as gaudy fabrications exploring the limits and the seductions of the American popular imagination. And it is in the ontological zone where physical geography (Vegas as wilderness-edge frontier), popular culture (Weissburg/Guynemer as movie composite) and historical conditions (Cuba) interpenetrate that the novel explores the pivotal terms of its diagnosis of a crisis-to-come.

On the night of 26 October 1962, as Kennedy is poised to ignite a world war by invading Cuba, Weissburg leads some fellow tourists into what may be a last spree, driving further west 'through the Dipper and Cassiopeia on to the Great American Desert'. As they sing anthems to frontier opportunity, to Puritan-inspired exceptionalism and to liberty – 'America', 'Onward Christian Soldiers', 'Don't Fence Me In' – the party engages in a latter-day 'errand into the wilderness'. And in the unformed desert, both inside and outside the time and space of American history, Weissburg/Guynemer implicates his fellows in the same narratives he is now using to re-configure himself. One guest disappears into the night shouting 'I am [Rudolph] Valentino. I am the sheikh!'. Another has been transformed in Weissburg's imagination into the 1930s Hollywood actress Winifred Shaw. And as Weissburg has sex in the sand he is transformed again, into Lawrence of Arabia ('Jesus. I. Lawrence of Arabia, am taking you, Marcy. You are the only one I have ever touched. You, Marcy, have made me, El Auren, whole'). It is as if the wilderness is being shaped by the desert hero of the latest cinema blockbuster in a new dispensation where America's foundational myths are being re-rendered into the popular mythologies of Hollywood. As he contemplates Armageddon – 'One finger. One button. CHOONG' – Weissburg/Guynemer/Lawrence issues a scream of desperate self-assertion into the uncharted desert night: 'MA-RONEMERICA' – *America, Mother of God*.

Amid the collision of references that propels *The Steagle's* Las Vegas episode – restlessly trying to reconfigure America's mythic frontier with a new, popular cultural national idea – one particular reference stands out:

"Do you still fly, Monsieur Guynemer?"

"Oh yes. I'll be off to Vietnam after the picture. Then the Congo. I just can't keep my nose out of things. You might say I'm chasing the Holy Grail."

(ST 120)

In 1962, the post-colonial struggles in Central Africa and South East Asia were significant proxy sites for America's Cold War contest with the Soviet Union. Neither however had yet troubled U.S. public confidence with high death tolls or domestic unrest. By 1966, by contrast, after the Tonkin Resolution and the first anti-war protests, Weissburg/Guynemer's reluctance to keep his 'nose out of things' would have seemed glaringly ironic. More critically, the mention of 'Holy Grail' refers the intensifying debate over U.S. policy back to the fault-lines already present in the exceptionalist appeals that accompanied America's re-assertion of its global role at the start of the decade. Philip Caputo, writing later, would identify 'the myths created by that most articulate and elegant mythmaker, John Kennedy' as the ideological spur to a campaign that would recruit the likes of Weissburg/Guynemer as its public-facing knights: 'the glamorous Prince of Camelot had given the new doctrine his imprimatur by sending the first Special Forces detachments to Vietnam, glamorous figures themselves in their green berets and paratrooper boots'.²⁴ And by 1966, Americans were already agonising over whether troops were being sent to a mythical-religious 'essential battlefield in America's crusade to preserve democracy', or into 'a wanton assault by a technological giant against a rural peasantry', an act of imperialism that risked making Vietnam 'a symbol of the deeper ills in society'.²⁵

In *The Steagle's* Las Vegas, the later divisions over Vietnam are already inferred in some of the episode's other popular cultural references. The songs the characters sing, for example, contain destabilising tensions. In 1961, as the Wall rose in Berlin, the East Germans played the frontier song 'Don't Fence Me In' – 'give me land, lots of land [...] where the west commences' – to encircled American soldiers, mocking the limits of U.S. power.²⁶ Bernstein and Sondheim's uplifting 'America' is an ambivalent anthem to the national dream: 'Skyscrapers bloom in America // Cadillacs zoom in America // Industrial boom in America [...] Twelve in a room in America'.²⁷ But those tensions ultimately cluster around the very public performances of self-transforming fantasy that Weissburg injects into a frontier zone – the Great American Desert, literal and metaphorical – which is itself being forced, by geopolitical events, into an act of self-examination, and redefinition. Las Vegas represents a pivotal locale where America's historical process of transforming the wilderness and the latter-day popular cultural expression of that process coincide. By channelling both into his constructed, and compromised, projection of himself – frontier hero, and celebrity – Weissburg effectively exposes the latent instabilities in both. And to the extent that much of that projection is

²⁴ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp.69,16.

²⁵ Lytle, pp.178,182.

²⁶ Cole Porter and Robert Fletcher, *Don't Fence Me In* (Warner Chappell Music Publishing, 1934).

²⁷ Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, 'America' (Boosey and Hawkes, 1957).

predicated, in turn, on the movies – *Laurence of Arabia*, *Hell's Angels* – it forms a connection between America's past and its emerging future, and the privileged site of popular culture which mediates, and enacts the transfer of foundational systems of myth, between the two: Hollywood.

2.2.4. The Steagle and the Movies.

The Steagle's prominent allusions to the movies persistently register the tensions inside Weissburg's sites of popular cultural referral. And as they come to dominate both the geography and sensibility of the novel, as the action climaxes on the West Coast, those allusions bring to the surface the hitherto submerged tensions, public and private, which will suggest the political crisis-to-come. At the edge of America, L.A., Weissburg slips into his richest and most public performances, transfiguring his entire personal history into a series of celluloid gestures that are, in many ways, the popular cultural expression of America's sense of exceptionalism. The precariousness in his performances however resonates beyond the Pacific seaboard, and further west into the exceptionalist project that, by 1966, was already becoming mired in South East Asia.

It is Saturday 27 October 1962. A U2 reconnaissance pilot has been shot down over Cuba; American military leaders are pressuring Kennedy to begin airstrikes. As the stand-off nears its climax, as 'the world is blowing up', Weissburg arrives at America's modern frontier: 'Yes. Beverley Hills, where Jello buddied up to Ronnie Coleman, who romanced Claudette under two flags, who sailed with Milland on the *Athenia*, who peeka-booped with Veronica Lake, who ...' (ST 141,142).²⁸ In a zone where the lines between real life and celebrity fictions are already blurred – Weissburg identifies 'three possibles and two just maybes' in the Hollywood Knickerbocker Hotel, 'Claude Rains, Kent Taylor, Dorothy Mackail ... Ralph Byrd, Karen Morley' – Weissburg himself is mistaken for Mickey Rooney and slips into the persona of one of Rooney's best remembered creations, Andy Hardy:

"I'm Robert Hardy. Bob. Actually they made those pictures about my family. Remember? *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, *Out West with the Hardys*. Well Andy was me really. They just changed my name so I wouldn't be too bugged, you know?" (ST 142)

²⁸ The reference to 'jello' is a reference to the Jell-O sponsored Jack Benny radio programme which ran from 1932 until 1955. Ronald Coleman was one of Benny's frequent Hollywood guests. The *Athenia* was the first British ship sunk during the Second World War and featured in the film *Arise, My Love* (1940) starring Ray Milland and Claudette Colbert.

At issue here is not simply the fact that Harold has adopted another fantasy. Rather, it is the richness of political meaning that is contained in that alter ego's specificity, the scale of its conception, and the disturbing prescience inferred in how it comes to re-configure the novel's entire text. For, critically, Weissburg imagines that 'MGM is thinking of remaking [a] series' of films that, in the 1930s and 40s, extolled mid-western, picket fence values in a form that, in the 1960s, will see 'Andy confronting Castro and Khrushchev. Working secretly with the President' (ST 148). Whatever values Andy Hardy may have embodied in a morally unambiguous Golden Age movie fiction, Weissburg's presentation of himself as the real-life embodiment of those values, and as their latter-day promoter in a new geopolitical climate, foregrounds a sense of conviction that what works inside American picket fences can also work in the world as a whole, now and into the future. At America's edge therefore Weissburg's most completely conceived alter ego plays out and explores the political implications of, and jeopardies inside, an American narrative of mythical-historical continuity as it encounters a threat to national survival and global prestige.

The allusion to the Andy Hardy franchise is no more casual than the novel's previous intermedial references. Here however the wider sense of political instability is distinctively traced back to the franchise's popular cultural solipsism and the parochialism of its idealised American past. The 1930s, when *A Family Affair* (1937) launched the series, was a period of pronounced American isolationism. Washington had refused to join the League of Nations; a series of Neutrality Acts sought to immunise Americans from growing tensions in Europe. The films themselves were geographically detached (set in a Carvel, Idaho of 'white frame house, white porch, newspaper sailing up every morning, dates, school dances') and inward-looking ('we were sort of the Average American family') (ST 143). The traditional values-affirming plots generally saw Andy/Rooney sorting out problems with girls or money by engaging in a 'heart-to-heart' with his sage father, Judge Hardy. More critically, the movies' introspection turned on the unambiguous promotion of foundational systems of American belief.

In *Andy Hardy Meets Debutante* (1940) for example, where Andy and the Judge travel to New York for a bruising but ultimately victorious encounter with 'big city' superficiality, the characters' heart-to-heart takes place in The Hall of Fame for Great Americans at Bronx Community College. Walking through a sculpture colonnade featuring Founding Father Alexander Hamilton and U.S. Presidents Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln, Andy laments that he is just a 'small-town hick with delusions of grandeur' and that his father is just 'a small-town judge that no-one ever heard of'.²⁹ His father reminds him that a search for 'class, money and social position' should not efface the fact the 'soil [he walks on]

²⁹ *Andy Hardy Meets Debutante*, dir. by George B. Seitz (MGM, 1940). Timecode (TC): 00:58:00.

was earned for [him] by the blood and tears of men who said that all men in America should be equal'.³⁰ And when the Judge wins a case against some aggressive metropolitan lawyers, he celebrates having 'an opportunity to win. A small-town judge with no social position had an opportunity equal to the big city lawyers [...] The mighty men of old made this that kind of a country. And that kind of country God willing it always will be'.³¹

Judge Hardy's exceptionalist tone would be echoed in the rhetoric of Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. So when Weissburg/Hardy talks of 'Andy Hardy [being] grown up, mature, but still living on the principles learned from the judge' and of MGM having him 'function in all the big trouble spots in the world, Berlin, Vietnam, *Cuba*', Faust is inviting scrutiny of America's reliance, in contemporary geopolitics, on a set of principles mythologised by cherished tradition, and reinforced by popular culture (ST 146). And the fault-lines in those principles are exposed by the way in which Weissburg inhabits them in his Bob Hardy alter ego, and performs their compromised consequences, as *the Steagle's* action moves through the Hollywood Hills.

In Hollywood, the novel's previous typographical diversions, designed to signpost its protagonist's collisions of memory, fantasy and desperate protest, come to dominate what is now an increasingly chaotic text, built it seems from jostling fragments of popular movie culture, and breathless typewritten press releases. In one moment, Weissburg is Dean Miller and Helen O'Connell's featured guest on NBC's *Here's Hollywood*: 'BOBBY HARDY, HIS EYES RAISED TO THE HORIZON, HIS FUTURE UNLIMITED, WAS SEEN TRYING A [HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD] STAR ON FOR SIZE. WHAT GIVES, BOBBY?' (ST 148). In another, he channels elements from multiple movie personalities – 'Doug Fair [banks], Rudy Val [lée], Jimmy C [agney], Gary [Cooper], Cary [Grant], Ty [Power]' – into a Hedda Hopper style 'HOLLYWOOD VIGNETTE' (ST 149). Shards of adolescent bitterness ('BOB WAS SET FOR NOTRE DAME', but Weissburg the Jew never made it there) fuse into the narrative of 'A STAR [WHO] CAN STILL BE BORN IN THE AMERICAN WAY' where the Hardy alter ego displaces Weissburg's previous fantasies ('Georges Guynemer' is now 'ACE OF ACES' in a movie starring Bob Hardy as discovered by Sam Goldwyn) to become a fully-fledged imaginary film star in his own right: 'SIGNED [...] TO A SIX PICTURE A YEAR CONTRACT [...] CULMINATING IN THE PICTURE WHICH BROUGHT HIM THE ACADEMY AWARD, "THE NAPOLEON BONAPARTE STORY"' (ST 149-50).

As much as this aggregation of cinematic fragments suggests a psychotic break, Weissburg's surrender to an incoherence in his own fantasies, it also suggests an ontological break in the world of the novel. It is as if the process of displacement whereby the events of

³⁰ *Debutante*. TC 00:55:41 and 00:56:00.

³¹ *Debutante*. TC 01:27:35.

the Cuban Crisis have jostled increasingly with popular cultural sites of (fantasy) reassurance has now tumbled towards a logical conclusion. Hollywood's machinery has surged in to subsume the text itself as the discontinuities of Weissburg's crisis are rendered nominally continuous by the language of classic movie editing: 'PRINT IT', 'CUT', 'DISSOLVE. BLANK SCREEN' (ST 156-62). In his vertiginous acts of alter ego adoption, meanwhile, Weissburg himself is subsumed into 'THE FULL LENGTH FEATURE THAT IS [HIS] REAL STORY': a sort of metafictional Mobius strip where not only is real life reconfigured into the neat structure of a movie, but where the movie is reconfigured back into real life. The Weissburg who can no longer detach himself from his performance of cultural exceptionalism, as 'A STAR [...] BORN IN THE AMERICAN WAY', simultaneously turns that performance back into the real world, as picket-fence Bob/Andy Hardy flying into Cuba, Berlin and Vietnam. In sum, we are now in a geographical zone which not only makes movies but whose every transaction is conditioned *by* the movies. And to the extent that that zone is at the contemporary edge of an America which is looking to extend the New Frontier of its political ambitions still further, it is poised to extend the celluloid version of exceptionalism that is mythologised in those movies too.

How that New Frontier exceptionalism might affect America's geopolitical performance, and how an uncritical mythologizing might ultimately descend into an eventual crisis of irreconcilable contradiction, is highlighted by a late-night performance on a Hollywood sound-stage at the climax of Weissburg's L.A. sojourn. Here Weissburg's alter ego and the rarely acknowledged darkness in America's movie mythology collide to produce an increasingly chaotic shadow play in which a decontextualized history and a raucous exceptionalism combine in a loud assertion of self-belief that fragments even as it is declared.

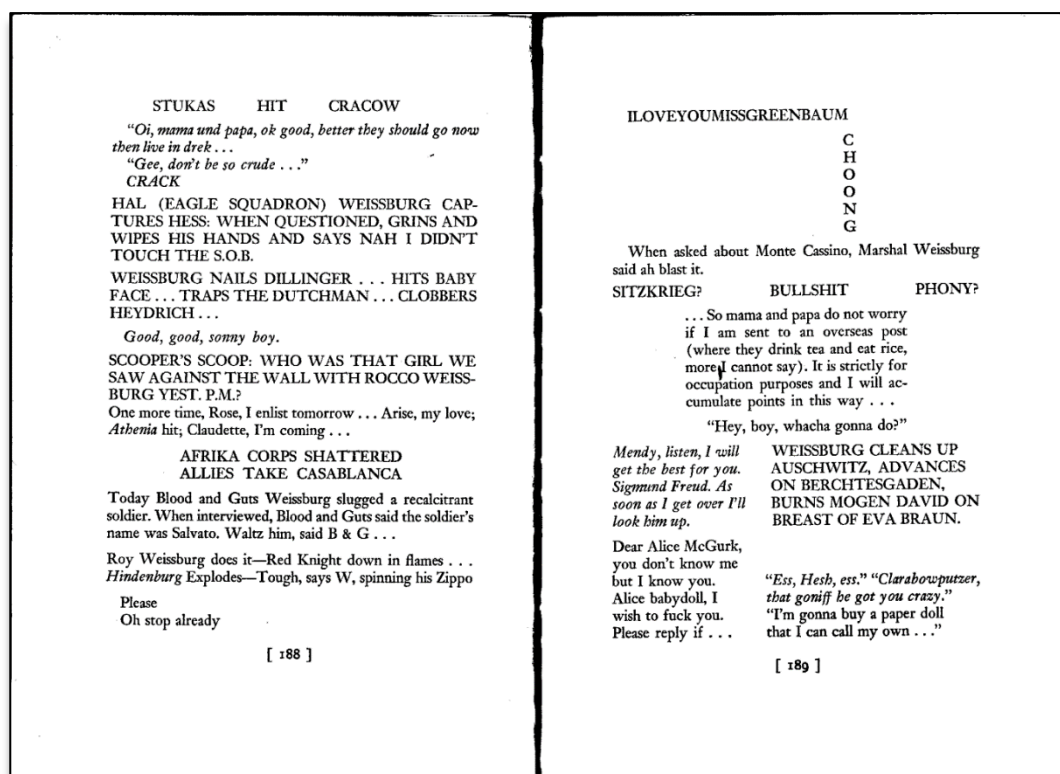
It is midnight on Saturday 27 October, the thirteenth and final day of the Cuban Crisis. Weissburg imagines fighting a war on the 'plywood street' and 'pretty cheesy-looking sets' of Summit Studios in the Hollywood Hills (ST 167-94). He has been taken there by a fellow fantasist. Tall Guy McCoy is a barroom drunk who 'thinks he's Bogart' and who once may, or may not, have been a Hollywood bit-player: Weissburg/Hardy 'remembers' him from a non-existent movie, '*Flaming Roundup at Dodge*', but also conflates him with the real-life cowboy actor Guinn 'Big Boy' Williams from Anatole Litvak's *Castle on the Hudson* (1940).

The pair's movie-set 'war' is a phantasmagorical response to the mounting tension in the nuclear crisis where the outcome in Cuba is rendered less precarious by the pair's immersion into a received narrative where America confidently won the day, a Hollywood version of World War Two. A bartender becomes a Japanese agent in Havana ('He's part of the operation. The Cuban plan. The goddam Axis'); Hardy and McCoy/Bogart imagine a saloon brawl in a confused reworking of *Casablanca* (1942):

And they were off their stools, swinging roundhouse rights and thunderbolt lefts, wading into the Fat Man and Veidt and all their Japanazi bastards, cleaning up, turning Rick's once more into a place where a nice guy Free French like Paul Henreid could take his wife for a quiet drink.

Popular cultural images of wars past invade the uncertainties of potential wars present and are refracted through one of the great Hollywood tales of heroic self-sacrifice: Rick Blaine/Humphrey Bogart choosing sides over cynical isolationism, and relinquishing his great love for the greater good.

Ultimately, this concatenation of references, and of different classes and sites of narrative (World War Two Europe, present-day America, the imaginary construct of a studio sound-stage), seem to outstrip the text's capacity to contain them. Even Weissburg's growing preoccupation with, and absorption into, the ordered storytelling and procedures of the movie industry cannot resist being fractured by the competing impulses it is trying subliminate. The page quite simply fragments (Figure 1):



(Figure 1)

If *The Steagle's* Hollywood section explores the processing-under-stress of American exceptionalist mythology into popular narrative, and the degree to which that processing contains both an immediate response to crisis and a basis for subsequent global adventure, then this sudden disintegration of text, typography and continuity projects the simultaneous degree to which that process contains the potential for chaos, contradiction and aggression.

Over seven pages of textual fragments, Weissburg seems to step momentarily into and out of a series of different narrative worlds each of which seeks, it appears, to alleviate the challenges posed by the others but all of which combine into an overall presentation of instability at best, bad faith at worst (ST 187-194). Thus, for example, Weissburg transfers his sexual anxieties ('ILOVEYOU MISSGREENBAUM') and sense of cultural otherness ('*Yes, Eva, I'm a J-Boy, you want more?*') into a putatively commanding image of himself as history-defining all-American hero ('HAL (EAGLE SQUADRON) WIESSBURG CAPTURES HESS'): an amalgam in turn of military superiority ('FIRST ARMORED TAKES WORMS WEISSBURG IN LEAD TANK'), American law-and-order folk-story ('WEISSBURG NAILS DILLINGER ... HITS BABY FACE') and fame-and-fortune celebrity fairy tale ('BETTY GRABLE FALLS FOR GI WHILE ON TOUR – GIVES UP CAREER'). At the same time, these fragments – variously newspaper headlines, aw-shucks wisecracks and intimate revelations – constantly oscillate between Weissburg's auto insertion into history and external historical events in and of themselves. The effect is to relate gross geopolitical developments back to their registration as issues of individual anxiety combined with an agenda of national assertion. Thus when 'WEISSBURG CLEANS UP AUSCHWITZ, ADVANCES ON BERCHTESGADEN, BURNS MOGAN DAVID ON BREAST OF EVA BRAUN', Weissburg is both the individual Jew negotiating the demons of the Holocaust, and the signal American spearheading a global assault on the symbols of evil. And thus, quotations which suggest manifold personalities ('Dear Papa Just because I am in the army does not mean I can shoot Hitler'; 'Dear Mrs Meltner, I hate to tell you this but your son Dave lays shiksas') juxtapose with loud headlines that seem to displace difference in favour of a common dynamic narrative, 'STUKAS HIT CRACOW ... AFRIKA CORPS SHATTERED ALLIES TAKE CASABLANCA'.

Amid the fragments, World War Two becomes a privileged site of mythical referral: a communal expression of American power, celebrated in the movies, capable of absorbing individual anxieties and rendering them heroic. Its outcome is as sure and nation-affirming as the outcome of the Cuban Crisis is not. And its geopolitical objectives appear in retrospect as clear as the motives for the U.S. deployment in Vietnam were, in 1966, still imprecise. What emerges ultimately therefore from this volatile mix of narratives and discourses is a diagnosis of bad faith behind an assertion of self-belief. It is not merely that Weissburg has escaped into fantasy, or found a way of sublimating his anxieties. It is his subscription to a collective narrative of exceptional behaviour, echoed through movie stories and images underscored by exceptionalist *myth*, that always already contains dark contradictions and doubts. There is a disconcerting queasiness in the playing-out of a frenzied, wide-ranging version of World War Two on the tawdry backlot of an unfashionable studio before television cameras that are not turned on in the company of a drunk who thinks he is Bogart. And there is a disconcerting

prescience in the degree to which this precarious confection has invaded both the page and world of the novel.

In Hollywood, where America encodes its myths into popular culture and from where the American frontier is poised for latter-day ideological expansion, imminent crisis has produced a vision of national reassurance which is headily self-assured on the one hand, but darkly prone to violence, moral confusion and self-serving on the other. One word, in various typographies, repeats through the backlot war as if to summarise this combination of exhilaration and destructiveness: 'CHOONGCHOONGCHOONGCHOONGCHOONGCHOONG' (*ST* 194). And 'CHOONG', as we have seen, expresses Weissburg's sense of America's wars and crises to come.

2.2.5. An Uneasy Future.

Thus far I have argued that the foreground presentation of Harold Weissburg's disintegration-in-the-face-of-crisis, and retreat into popular cultural fantasy, has – in its displacement of the private into the public – contained a diagnosis about America itself at a point in history where its self-assigned exceptionalism was redefining itself. In the desert beyond Las Vegas, questions are raised about the narratives that once drove the extension of the frontier and that now, with nuclear destruction threatening, might be called upon again to rebuild and re-energise the Union. In Hollywood, those mythical narratives are reconfigured as popular celluloid stories, but ultimately fragment as they confront but cannot accommodate their inherent contradictions.

No surprise then perhaps that when Weissburg awakes on Sunday 28 October 1962 and learns that he should 'thank [his] lucky stars for Kennedy. He made the goddam Russians pull out', his immediate sense that he no longer needs to escape into the movies ('he panned, he flashbacked, he dissolved and he shivered like he was going cold turkey') is subsumed by ambiguity (*ST* 196,7). On the one hand, he registers what appears to be a re-assertion of America's global influence: he stares out 'over the Blue Pacific to Pearl and Hiro and Nagasaki and Moscow and Havana' thereby linking the outcome of the Cuba Crisis with the history of World War Two, and the 'postwar decisions' that followed America's victory over Japan, 'Finished. Three O. Kaput. Like V-J Day' (*ST* 197). On the other hand, 'he open[s] his eyes in relief and surprise and with one gigantic bubble vomit[s] all over the bed', caught somewhere it seems between recovery and vertiginous disorientation. And it is that ambiguity which drives the novel's closing sequences, and contains its residual political force.

The Cuban Crisis, Weissburg perceives, has created 'a leak in the dike [where] the whole world rushes in. The whole postwar world' (ST 201-2). It is a resonant expression. It suggests first that the Crisis has exposed the fault-lines in the global balance-of-power. It infers second the emergence of a dispensation where sheer complexity, 'the whole world', contests the hitherto clearly defined, binary assumptions of the Cold War. And third, that recognition of complexity infers a questioning of the narratives that conditioned those assumptions in the first place, not least of America's global primacy. It is a tense and vertiginous formulation which always already projects a crisis-to-come, poised as it is between disorientation and a nostalgia for a time when the lines of demarcation were more clear.

After his latter-day errand into the wilderness, exploring America at its frontier site of foundational definition, Weissburg returns home therefore, towards the east and its connectedness with the wider world, to negotiate a new set of national conditions. Weissburg's return to New York however is accompanied less by relief and happy endings, than by an uncomfortable prescience that America's new conditions are predicated on narratives which are eventually unstable. The myths and imagined victories of Weissburg's Hollywood night continue to tussle with their historical contradictions.

Thus the picket-fence America Weissburg observes from his train window is no longer the innocent world of the Andy Hardy movies. Instead it is a world compromised by an unspoken history of exceptionalism which now casts Andy Hardy in a new franchise of global intervention:

Look out, Harold, out, externalise: see *America* first. See white church steeple [...] Porches. White. Quiet [...] General Frémont Hotel. Pathfinder. Porch. Rockers. Three people. White Quiet ... Washington Duke Hotel ... Duke of Durham. Where the weak grow strong and the strong grow stronger. (ST 204)

Here, images of a comforting America betray a history of division, aggression and contention. John C. Frémont was both a celebrated pathfinding explorer who opened up the American West in the 1840s and a self-promoting adventurer who was jailed for unilaterally declaring himself Governor of California; an emancipator of slaves, and a Civil War commander sacked by Lincoln for insubordination. Washington Duke, meanwhile, was a tobacco entrepreneur who died a celebrated philanthropist but whose fortune was built on slavery.

Crossing through Wyoming, Weissburg re-maps the historical West as an ambiguous combination of celluloid heroism, and predatory violence. Frontier folk heroes dovetail into Hollywood cowboy films ('Bat [Masterson], Wild Bill, Rich Dix, Belle, Doc, John Mack Brown, Wyatt, Destry and Calamity Jean Arthur'); 'the clean, uncluttered Big Country' has to accommodate the heroic self-sacrifice of 'Shane [Alan Ladd] blood spreading through his white

shirt, white vest, white soul', and the narrow determination of John Wayne driving his cattle in Howard Hawkes' 'Red River' (ST 217-218). Meanwhile, the expansionist defeat of the Indians ('they clobbered Geronimo and Cochise and Taza') and the commercial warfare between ranchers ('the miserable sheepmen and their miserable grass-killing sheep') betray a darker side to cinema's narrative of Western exceptionalism. Weissburg even goes so far as to defend America's idealised vision of its frontier history, despite its contradictions:

"Balls it never existed."

"Read Jack Frémont. And Zebulon M. Pike –" [Weissburg]

"It's a miserable inversion of all the known facts. The real west was an unromantic hell hole. Still is."

[...]

"No. No, it's our heritage –" (ST 218)

As the train approaches New York, so the ambiguous images of western expansion segue into equally ambiguous narratives of ideological and global influence-building. Weissburg imagines selling a novel about the liberation of Buchenwald as a nation-defining 'Gone with the Wind of World War Two', while retaining 'casting control' over the actors who starred in his previous fantasies, Gary Cooper, Claudette Colbert, Conrad Veidt, Sidney Greenstreet (ST 210-212). He recasts himself as 'Lanny Budd', his cross-country spree reconfigured as 'a secret mission [...] down to Cuba' in the manner of Upton Sinclair's socialite-cum-freelance-American diplomat, an Andy Hardy who meddles in world history. And the novel concludes with Weissburg anticipating the next sites of American global self-assertion via the barely articulate 'CHOONG' that characterised the crisis of narrative that culminated in his Hollywood night:

'BERLIN? CHOONG [...] VIETNAM. CHOONG [...] CONGO. CHOONG [...] BIRMINGHAM, CYPRUS, LAOS, ISRAEL. CHOONG CHOONG CHOONG CHOONG [...] CHOBBOONG, CHOBBOONG, CHOBBOONG.' (ST 245-7)

Reflecting on Vietnam's impact on American society as the signal global intervention of the Nixon Years, David Steigerwald offers the following diagnosis:

The war forced Americans to reconsider the most fundamental assumptions about the nature of their society: about its moral purpose, its strength or weakness of character, its historic role, its masculine attributes, the legitimacy of its political systems.³²

The Steagle invokes and anticipates many of the issues that Steigerwald and others were to identify in retrospect. Hellmann, for example, notes the exceptionalism whereby 'America was the leader of the Forces of Light and its enemies necessarily the Forces of Darkness' which

³² Steigerwald, p.118

translated into 'Americans perceive[-ing] themselves as having a world destiny intertwined with the fate of Asia'.³³ And Stephen Ambrose identifies a national complicity in the drift from Kennedy's idealism to Nixon's continued prosecution of the conflict: 'by wrapping himself in the flag and appealing to the patriotism – and the jingoism – of the public, the President could keep his war going'.³⁴

That America 'fought the wrong war in Vietnam' was already becoming clear when *The Steagle* was published in 1966.³⁵ To that extent, Weissburg/Guynemer/Hardy's invocation of Hiroshima and the backlot re-staging of World War Two were already ironic commentaries on a national faith in sheer military power that may have forced a resolution in Cuba but did not cow the North Vietnamese at Khe Sanh. But the novel is not a place to look, with hindsight, for predictive clues as to how the Vietnam War would ultimately be fought and lost. It is a however a site which identifies – and critiques – the structures of belief that led to war, and prompted the divisive national debate which escalated through the Nixon presidency.

Both Kennedy and Johnson framed Vietnam as a site for a re-asserted performance of 'City Upon a Hill' exceptionalism: 'our enduring covenant' said Johnson in 1965.³⁶ These are the New Frontier values embodied in Andy Hardy, Lanny Budd and Shane. Within a few years however the contradictions inside those idealised narratives had surfaced into global disapproval and domestic protest. In seeking 'an honourable peace' in Vietnam, Nixon sought to end an unpopular war while retaining American prestige. By nonetheless continuing to deploy military power, some of it in secret, he simultaneously sought to project a sustained image of influence that would determine an ideological battle that extended beyond South East Asia alone. The consequences of this thinking – inferred in the discourses swirling through and around *The Steagle's* protagonist – created a division between 'the mind-set that conceived of the United States as God's country' and an administration that 'abandoned idealism for military power' and sparked much of the turmoil of the Nixon Years.³⁷

2.3. Willy Remembers

If *The Steagle* exposes the fault-lines that would lead to a crisis in public belief during Nixon Years, then *Willy Remembers* plunges the reader inside the crisis itself. Published in

³³ Hellmann, pp.6,4.

³⁴ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p.340

³⁵ Loren Baritz, *Backfire*, p.233.

³⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, 'The President's Inaugural Address, 20 January 1965' in *APP* [accessed 6 April 2015]

³⁷ Baritz, *Backfire*, p.228

1971, as the *Pentagon Papers* revealed the administration's bad faith over Vietnam and as Lt. William Calley was found guilty of the massacre at My Lai, the novel captures an intense climate of political and cultural cognitive dissonance.

Its narrator, the garrulous Willy Kleinhans – an emblematic little 'klein' man, and former infantryman – struggles to locate himself between two contradictory narratives of national life. On one side, there is his past subscription to American 'world powership', the exceptionalist confidence that Nixon asserted would still lead to a 'victorious peace' in Vietnam (WR 88).³⁸ On the other, there is a sense of disappointment and betrayal – 'I bust my bananas and what do I get? Looks and vomit' Willy shouts at one point, 'is this what I made America a world power for?' – which invokes the climate of protest where, in April 1971, Vietnam veterans threw their medals onto the Capitol steps (WR 113). Willy's dense concatenation of, often misremembered, histories, mythical assertions, popular cultural reference points and private anxieties concentrates the novel-cum-memoir he narrates into a crisis moment where Vietnam emerges as the enervating product of contested systems of national belief.

And yet the novel does not mention Vietnam. Its subject instead is another exceptionalist adventure, the Spanish-American War, in which Willy fought some seventy years before. The *moment* of Vietnam however is thrown into relief by the exceptionalist narratives that inspired the earlier conflict and the uncritical exceptionalist myths that emerged *from* America's first assertion of global ambition. Together they underpin a metafiction which addresses America's dissonance over South East Asia by politically and precisely unravelling the tussle between myth and history in the invocation of the war of 1898 as a precedent for America's exceptionalist behaviour.

Willy – ninety and alone in a veterans' home having survived two disappointing sons and a lacklustre marriage – is both an unreliable and an ex-centric narrator. His memory is comically faulty (he thinks Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President McKinley for example) but his memoir also absorbs the popular cultural artefacts and press reports through which American history, and the Spanish-American War in particular, have been mediated. At the same time, however, he also positions himself as the witness-from-the-trenches whose authentic experience deliberately contests the self-serving heroics and patriotic propaganda which translated the U.S. campaign in nineteenth century Cuba into a vector for imperial expansion and geopolitical assertiveness.

³⁸ Nixon campaign speech at Hampton, New Hampshire, 5 May 1968 quoted in Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), p.45.

The volatility of Willy's narrative voice(s) suggests that *Willy Remembers* might be most profitably read as a series of interpenetrating layers, whose conflicting perspectives and metafictional constructions cluster around one salient historical event. At the novel's centre is the celebrated charge, by future president Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders, up San Juan Hill on 1 July 1898. And in the layers' competitive framing of that moment – as variously imperial military manoeuvre, election-securing political spin, and grand folkloric spectacle of Wild West heroism – the novel finds a site for exploring, and identifying the contestations inside, the construction of national myth.

In the volatility of his memoir, Willy both critiques and legitimises the exceptionalist forces that drove the American Century. The novel's residual effect however is to position him as an emblematic figure in a contemporary crisis. In his self-conscious subscription to national narratives and political myths he knows by experience to be precarious, and in continuing to promote them despite the subsequent disappointments of a life they were meant to inspire, Willy channels an American sense of determination which is already struggling with its own limitations. So perceived, Willy's personal confusion infers the underlying causes of the wider climate of political confusion surrounding him as he speaks in 1971. By tacitly invoking the parallels between the war in Cuba and the war in Vietnam, by signalling their common roots in a national narrative of exceptionalism but also their common reluctance to engage with their consequent delusions and bad faith, *Willy Remembers* offers both a textual expression and a political diagnosis of a contemporary crisis which is propelled by an uncritical referral to cherished mythologies.

2.3.1. The Production and Propagandising of Precarious Narratives.

The novel's first layer is Willy's breathless account of the 'grand adventure' that takes him from basic training to San Juan Hill and on to demobilisation at Montauk, Long Island. Nominally a sequential memoir of real events, the Spanish American War's signal status in the exceptionalist narrative is progressively destabilised by an ironic sense of outcome which loops back through time. In this, Vietnam is inferred as the ultimate product of historical narratives whose precariousness was always already contained in the very passion of their promotion.

Consider, for example, the circularity in this, one of Willy's grandiloquent statements of national purpose, retrospectively describing the ground war in the Cuban jungle: 'the Spanish-American War could just as easily have been called the First World War, with the First being the Second and so on, as we became a power while the whole world watched' (*WR* 136). C20th history is compressed into an American programme of global assertion. Willy's self-

promotion is rolled into the U.S. conviction of legitimacy that applied in 1917 and 1941 and that stemmed in turn from President McKinley's decision to confront the Spanish Empire in the War of 1898. But by the early 1970s 'and so on' would also, and always already, have inferred the inconclusive Korean conflict, the stalemated 'return' to Cuba during the Missile Crisis, and of course Vietnam: a tacitly ironic recognition of the ultimate limits to American power even as 60s rhetoric trumpeted its global and historical pre-eminence. That irony circles back to ruefully suggest that if Cuba and the Philippines were indeed the first 'world' war of an 'American Century', then America's first major projection of global exceptionalism already contained the instabilities that, by 1971, had surfaced in South East Asia.

The novel's texture of restless circularity in which two exceptionalist adventures collapse together to interrogate each other's assumptions across time, is underlined by parallels in their events, mythical underpinning and popular promotion. Both wars were largely ideological, prosecuted in support of people whose local struggles were perceived to echo the democratic rejection of foreign interference that characterised America's own War of Independence. In 1898, 'the American people' writes Paul T. McCartney, 'were galvanized by the Cuban rebels who fought, as Americans' own forebears had, for self-determination'.³⁹ In Vietnam, the U.S. translated ideological opposition to the Soviet Union into support for the anti-communist regime in Saigon 'with the ultimate intention' writes Spanos, 'of securing it for the West, the "free world"'.⁴⁰ Both wars escalated and galvanised support around symbolic acts of aggression against American military assets. The explosion which sank the USS Maine in Havana harbour in February 1898, killing over two hundred and sixty U.S. seamen, was blamed on the colonial Spanish government by rabble-rousing American newspapers and became an ostensive *casus belli*. In August 1964, a disputed NVA attack on the USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin allowed President Johnson to escalate operations in Vietnam. In both cases, however, precisely what happened, whether the U.S. was indeed attacked or not, has remained unclear, raising sustained suspicions that both were, at best, events of serendipity which allowed Washington to claim patriotic defence for campaigns which were in fact ideologically driven.⁴¹

Critically, as McCartney notes, President McKinley's declaration of war against Spain was driven by a potent cluster of American beliefs. Winthrop's exceptionalist theology,

³⁹ Paul T. McCartney, *Power and Progress: American National Identity, the War of 1898, and the Rise of American Imperialism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), p.87.

⁴⁰ Spanos, *American Exceptionalism*, p.58.

⁴¹ Baritz, *Backfire*, p. 141, notes that Johnson insisted the Tonkin incident was unprovoked, and failed to tell Congress about a series of secret U.S. raids, codenamed 34A, which had been directed against North Vietnam in the days immediately before.

Adams' sense of territorial destiny, Lincoln's unifying vision of America as 'the last best hope of Earth' combined in the 1890s into a post-Civil War expression of energetic national purpose where 'Americans presumed themselves to be humanity's vanguard, the cutting edge of social revolution [with] a particular responsibility to bring others up to the standards of American civilisation'.⁴² The project however already contained contradictions. The 'American mission' to spread liberal democracy also revived aggressive notions of Manifest Destiny.⁴³ The extension of U.S. civilisation led to the post-war annexation of The Philippines, an act of expansion whose imperialist connotations were subsumed into a narrative that 'could not be resisted by Americans themselves caught, willing or unwilling, in the coils of fate'.⁴⁴ Victory over Spain, meanwhile, promoted the cowboy image of Teddy Roosevelt and energised the conviction under his presidency that America had the right to intervene abroad 'in chronic wrongdoing [with] the exercise of an international police power'.⁴⁵ In short, argues McCartney, the U.S. entered the twentieth century with a mythically-charged, but already contestable, sense of geopolitical self-belief:

Paradigmatically, the Spanish-American War embodied the full spirit of the idea of American Mission – including its assertion of American exceptionalism, its concerns for the well-being of (some) others, its misguided belief that the only solution for the problems of those "others" was to force them to submit to the "benevolent" control of the United States, and its dressing of naked self-interest with capacious claims of national virtue.⁴⁶

Vietnam was, in many ways, a product of that narrative. But in the stubborn resistance of the North Vietnamese, there was a stark reminder, argues Hellmann, of the 'misguided belief' in that narrative's ultimate sustainability, 'defeat and disillusion [had] for the first time [become] a significant part of the national experience'.⁴⁷ And by 1971, as peace talks stalled and the Pentagon Papers called the entire adventure into question, 'the 'spectre' of Vietnam' according to Spanos, 'came to haunt America as a contradiction that menaced the legitimacy of its perennial self-representation as the exceptionalist and "redeemer nation"'.⁴⁸

⁴² Abraham Lincoln, 'Second Annual Message to Congress, 1st December 1862' in *APP* [accessed 4 May 2015]. McCartney, p.47.

⁴³ McCartney, p.45.

⁴⁴ Richard Hofstadter, 'Cuba, the Philippines and Manifest Destiny', in Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp.145-187 (p.177).

⁴⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, 'Fourth Annual Message to Congress, 6 December 1904' in *APP* [accessed 5 March 2015]

⁴⁶ McCartney, p.45.

⁴⁷ Hellmann, p.4.

⁴⁸ Spanos, *American Exceptionalism*, p.ix.

Thus when Willy talks of Cuba establishing the U.S. as 'the Charley Paddock of the world's armies', or of changing 'the course of history for this great country', there is an immediate sense of topical irony (*WR* 224,12). To the extent meanwhile that Willy casually channels the heroic images (Paddock, 'the fastest man alive' won 100m gold in the 1920 Olympics) and strident language of popular culture, Faust critiques not only the exceptionalist myth itself, but also its means of transmission.

In *Willy Remembers*' numerous references to the press, Faust intimates a connection between the effect of 'yellow journalism' on public enthusiasm for war against Spain, and the massaging of opinion the U.S. administration attempted in Vietnam. Michael Herr would later highlight the 'Four o' clock Follies' in Saigon where 'nothing so horrible ever happened upcountry that it was beyond language fix and press relations'.⁴⁹ Faust's analysis however extends beyond mere spin.

As Hofstadter has observed, the Spanish-American War was 'brought on' in no small degree 'by sensational newspapers' and by a circulation war between America's two leading proprietors, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, that 'catered to the bellicosity of the public' and fuelled 'the psychic crisis of the 1890's'.⁵⁰ Pulitzer's *New York World* editorialised about Spanish troops shedding Cuban rebel 'blood on the roadsides, blood in the fields, blood on the doorsteps'.⁵¹ Hearst's *New York Journal* headlined the sensational story of Eva Cisneros, 'the Cuban Girl Martyr', allegedly imprisoned by the Spaniards and then daringly freed by reporter Karl Decker. Asking Congress for a declaration of war, President McKinley would channel headline outrage at Spain's 'cruel, barbarous and uncivilised practices' into the prosecution of American values 'laid down by the founders of the Republic'.⁵²

The novel captures this amalgam of populist hysteria and political purpose in its references to artist 'Fred Remington [being sent] down to show the dago feeling up naked women', to Willy himself 'sail[-ing] to liberate Cuba, avenge the *Maine* and protect fair woman kind' and, in the epigraph, to the celebration of headline power over fact attributed to Hearst (and Citizen Kane): '*you supply the pictures, I'll supply the war*' (*WR* 43,59,6). Faust's strategy however is not merely to highlight the propagandist power of the press, but rather to locate it as the site of an eventual epistemological crisis where the myth systems it promotes fragment around their own precariousness.

The interrogation is sometimes direct. Willy persistently complains about Richard Harding Davis' lionising of Roosevelt and the Rough Riders: 'Dickie and Teddy in cahoots [...]

⁴⁹ Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (London: Picador, 1979), p.40.

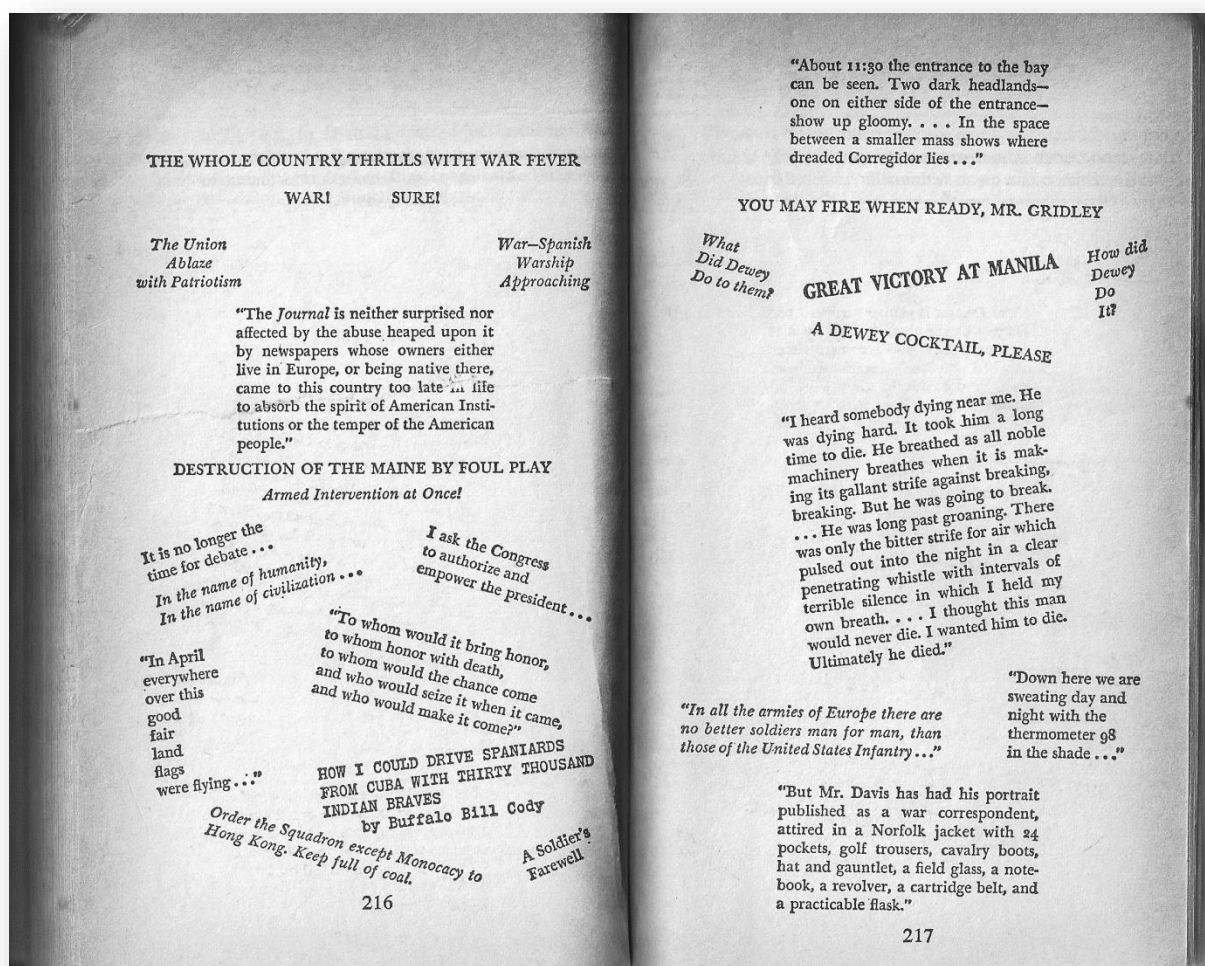
⁵⁰ Hofstadter, pp.158,148.

⁵¹ *New York World*, 17 May 1896, quoted in McCartney, p.92.

⁵² William McKinley, 11 April 1898.

were shooting straight up their ink-stained way to the glory road' (WR 95). At other times interrogation is inferred in the casual conflation of eyewitness testimony with discredited fiction. Willy blames 'Old Joe Pulitzer' for floating an airship over the Cuban battlefield, thereby drawing lethal fire on his detachment (WR 10). There is no record of a wartime airship, just mystery sightings over the southern U.S. from 1897 onwards. Willy's memoir loops restlessly between immediate patriotic trust in questionable sources (Hearst 'was telling it straight') and critical remediation in retrospect: in 1907 Willy uses the pages of Davis' *The Rough Riders* 'for toilet paper' (WR 10,237).

Faust however amplifies the political force of Willy's idiosyncratic account of history by means of deliberate metafictional intervention. In a set-piece, the author interrupts Willy's relentless first-person flow with several pages of, what appear to be, fragmentary newspaper cuttings (WR 215-221).



(Figure 2).

The cuttings offer a scrapbook summary of the entire campaign, from 'MAINE EXPLOSION CAUSED BY BOMB OR TORPEDO?' to a victorious 'HAIL COLUMBIA': a collage narrative

mediated by exceptionalist conviction. Thus, in figure 2 above, real events (like Admiral Dewey's destruction of the Spanish fleet – 'GREAT VICTORY AT MANILA') juxtapose with outright propaganda ('THE WHOLE COUNTRY THRILLS WITH WAR FEVER') and appeals to popular folklore ('HOW I COULD DRIVE SPANIARDS FROM CUBA WITH THIRTY THOUSAND INDIAN BRAVES by Buffalo Bill Cody'). Elsewhere, the War is extracted from the incommensurable complexities of history as its fragmentary slogans, anecdotes and uncritical testimonies are reconciled to the assertions of national mythology. Self-sacrifice ('Down here we are sweating day and night') is highlighted alongside triumphalism ('*In all the armies of Europe there are no better soldiers man for man, than those of the United States Infantry*'); American values ('*In the name of humanity, in the name of civilization*') attract international approval ('VIVA CUBA LIBRE! VIVAN LOS AMERICANOS!').

The metafictional impact is complex. The immediate effect, foregrounded in the formatting, is to divide the public record – news as the first draft of history – from the partiality of Willy's memoir. What is at stake here however extends beyond the self-evident historiographic point that what might propose itself as authentic reporting may itself be an agenda-driven construction. Rather, that invitation towards criticality surrenders to an eventual sense of epistemological crisis. Willy is unreliable; the public record may be mediated by propaganda and mythology; and in the novel's juxtaposition of the two, Faust implicates the reader in a vertiginous circuit of persistent doubt where historical events recede into unstable fictions (the headlines include 'THE PURPLE BUTTON OF FEAR by Craven Steen', a mocking revision of Stephen Crane's Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage*) or acquire undue resonance through debatable teleologies, 'DESTRUCTION OF THE MAINE BY FOUL PLAY'.⁵³

To the extent *Willy Remembers* infers historical parallels between the events of 1898 and Vietnam, this sense of unresolved doubt around the status of historical knowledge destabilises the exceptionalist narratives that were popularly promoted to support and now link both adventures. The sense of 'psychic crisis' that emerges from the novel's fusing of headlines – politics with promotion, policy with propaganda, '**PRESIDENT MCKINLEY PRAISES THE CUBAN EDITION OF THE JOURNAL**' – projects forward into the miasma of contradiction that later characterised pronouncements from Saigon. In the rebranding of the stalemate at Khe Sanh as a U.S. victory which Herr described as doing 'the same thing to your perception of the war that flares did to your night vision'.⁵⁴ In Peter Arnett's report from Bến Tre which

⁵³ Crane himself was a Hearst reporter at the Spanish-American War, and was amongst those who mythologised Roosevelt's Rough Riders.

⁵⁴ Herr, p.149.

captured the absurdity of wholesale destruction masquerading as enlightened purpose, 'it became necessary to destroy the town to save it'.⁵⁵

2.3.2. History Fragmented and Compressed.

If the novel's *climate of crisis* is inscribed into its background layer of contested myths and epistemological doubt, the *experience of crisis* is inscribed in the degree to which that hinterland infects the performance of its narrator. Here, Willy's characteristic idiom is the sudden swerve into a dense flow of gossip, popular cultural reference and shards of decontextualized history delivered as if in direct speech:

Talk to me about Bobby Kennedy, I'll give you Abner McKinley. Oh he was one shrewd little pipsqueak, Abner, although in all honesty, he was not a skirt chaser on wheels like the president's brother-in-law George Caxton [...] that Abner was some promoter [...] Everyone knew he was the busiest five percenter in D.C. and so whilst we were puking up sow and our bellies on the *Seneca*, the word was passed that this was one more of Ab's shady deals, for the ship's brokerage was right down his dark little alley. (WR 29-30)

Arbitrary fragments of memory erupt into a volatile jostling between retrospective bitterness (we suffered on the troop ships so others could profit) and a precarious attempt to develop narrative significance: what precise aspect of Bobby Kennedy prompts associations with 'skirt-chasers' and 'promoters' is unclear outside, perhaps, of gossip columns. But it does compress history as if, in Willy's mind, seventy years of American politics have collapsed into a moment of solipsistic logic (even if it immediately re-fragments). The novel-wide sense that Willy is persistently submerged in a personal crisis of self-justification resonates outward however into a more collectively resonant – and more politically *immediate* – rendering of crisis as Willy's memorialised fragments try, but ultimately fail, to coalesce around the cherished narratives that might give his life, and his century, eventual meaning.

The tone is set in the novel's opening line: 'Major Bill McKinley was the greatest president I ever lived through. No telling how far he could have gone if *Oswald hadn't shot him*' (WR 7, italics mine). There is more to this than the comedy of unreliability which forgets that McKinley was actually shot by an anarchist, Leo Czolgosz, in September 1901. Willy will tell us later that Oswald also shot President Garfield (assassinated 1881) and 'took a pot shot at [Teddy] Roosevelt in 1912' (WR 9,232). The invocation of Lee Harvey Oswald as an all-

⁵⁵ Peter Arnett, 'Major Describes Move', *New York Times*, 8 February 1968: an account of the U.S. Military's policy of destroying civilian villages to prevent Vietcong infiltration.

purpose portmanteau assassin criss-crossing Willy's near century of life activates circuits of reference which oscillate wildly between emotional expressions of national solidarity and a volatile reverence for mythical connections between the politics of lost leaders.

By 1971, Oswald's name was a byword for the national trauma which deepened the legacy effect of JFK's interrupted presidency. Klinkowitz writes that Kennedy's 'glory was to transform the American people with him, to rise to his call and sustain that fervour after his death'.⁵⁶ At the same time, the mystery around Oswald's motives, and even his guilt, was also a byword for conspiracy theories and narratives rendered fragile by contradiction.⁵⁷

Thus, on the one hand, Willy's formulation asserts a narrative connection between the global interventions of two men, McKinley and Kennedy, whose exceptionalist significance was consolidated, in many ways, by their premature deaths. McKinley's 1898 invocation of 'the founders of the Republic' is echoed in Kennedy's later 'Vietnam represents a test of American responsibility and determination'.⁵⁸ To that extent also the looming presence of Oswald retrospectively confers on McKinley popular values that attached to the assassination of JFK: of a Camelot demolished, of a new and forward-looking national dispensation interrupted.

On the other hand, the preposterous continuities inferred by Oswald's history-hopping homicides throw into relief the tensions inside the narrative Willy proposes to himself, and to the reader. If Kennedy and McKinley are conjoined in Willy's mind not only with each other, but also with Teddy Roosevelt, then they are also rolled up with Roosevelt's cowboy-style politics, and nascent U.S. imperialism: 'if we are to hold our own in the struggle for naval and commercial supremacy, we must build up our power without our own borders' Roosevelt wrote in 1899.⁵⁹ The reference to Garfield meanwhile highlights his administration's singular commitment towards expanding U.S. military capacity.

It is as if Willy is struggling to reconcile the eccentricities of his memory with a determined act of myth-making which erupts, in turn, as an utterance as emphatic in its narrative assertions as it is immediately unstable. The complex Oswald-focused connections by which, on the one hand, Willy strives to deflect crisis by constructing an unbroken history of visionary exceptionalism, also contain on the other hand unspoken references to, for example, a history of aggressive power projection that he seeks to deny. Again Vietnam is not

⁵⁶ Jerome Klinkowitz, *The American 1960s: Imaginative Acts in a Decade of Change* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980), p.9.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X Files* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.76-116.

⁵⁸ John F. Kennedy, 'Remarks at the Conference on Vietnam Luncheon in the Hotel Willard, Washington, DC, 1 June 1956' in *KPL* [accessed 19 May 2015]

⁵⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, 'The Strenuous Life: Speech before the Hamilton Club, Chicago, 10 April 1899', in Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses* (New York: Dover, 2009), pp.1-10 (p.4).

mentioned explicitly. But the adjacent climate of national crisis over America's fate there – whether Nixon would extricate the U.S. with its reputation intact – is inferred in Willy's attempt to maintain reverence for the exceptionalist project he himself fought for under McKinley and which continued into the adventures of Kennedy, but which his own direct experience also suggests is a betrayal at least, and a lie at worst. This is underlined by the novel's relentless process of unwrapping, where history-as-experienced chips away at the myths both Willy, and an America in Vietnam, seek to sustain.

2.3.3. Willy's Battlefield.

If *Willy Remembers*' first layer is its invocation of the grand, but precarious, narratives that span history to link two signal expressions of U.S. exceptionalism and the second layer is Willy's personal crisis as he retrospectively tries to legitimise himself inside contested historical continuities, then the third layer is Willy's direct reporting of the privileged personal encounters that structure his memoir.

On the Cuban battlefield around San Juan Hill however Willy's memoir is already a looping one: remediated by subsequent eventualities which destabilise its claims to historical authenticity. And in the novel's intense battlefield prose, Faust most clearly inscribes the connections that make Cuba an imaginative proxy for the eventual experience of Vietnam, not least in the way Willy cannot avoid mythologising, and thereby self-legitimising, the contradictions and grotesqueness of his experience. Two pronounced episodes illustrate this.

Willy's voyage to Cuba is accompanied by expressions of breathless excitement. He is 'on his way to glory'; the U.S. expeditionary fleet is 'grand to see, all that thrilling and chilling American power sounding off'; retrospect remediates his youthful energy into an expression of applied exceptionalism, 'talk about Omaha and Utah Beach and D Days and LCTs and LCIs, hell we invented amphibious landings [...] we poured it on [the Cuban coast] Normandy and Iwo could not lord it over that ploughed up shore' (*WR* 19,87,61,86). And at the Battle of Santiago on 3 July 1898, Willy's rhapsodic auto-insertion into the American Century's grand narrative reaches a crescendo:

I will match that holy hell with the Argonne. And Chancellorsville. And Vera Cruz. And Bunker Hill. And Wounded Knee. And Bastogne. And Inchon. And Lundy's Lane. And St. Lo. And Shiloh. And Anzio. And Saratoga. And Okinawa. And Quebec. And Cassino. (*WR* 121)

This litany of American history refracted through a scrapbook of armed conflicts – from the revolutionary confrontation with the British at Bunker Hill in 1775 to the American-led

recapture of South Korea that began at Inchon in September 1950 – glosses over, but cannot avoid, the denials that undermine its self-aggrandising mythologising. The Union victory at Shiloh in 1862, during the Civil War, is listed alongside the Confederate victory at Chancellorsville, Virginia in 1863, a reminder of the divisions that continued to dog American notions of national unity even, in the candidacy of the southern segregationist George Wallace, during the 1968 election. American leadership in the Argonne Forest in 1918, at Anzio in 1944 and Okinawa in 1945 – decisive victories in two World Wars – are offset by the mention of Wounded Knee, the massacre of some three hundred Sioux Indians by the U.S. Army in December 1890. Willy's war emerges as a site of problematized nostalgia, where the legitimacy of exceptionalist assertion is infected by an eventual historical unease which includes for example, and as Dee Brown observes, a recognition that 'virtually all the great myths of the American West' emerged from a time when 'the culture and civilisation of the American Indian was destroyed'.⁶⁰

The sense that America's ideological aims for the Spanish War were not only already tainted, but also contained corrosive implications for America's future conduct is emphatically pronounced in the novel's most distinctive episode: an eerily prescient, heat-of-the-battle moment which fuses individual and national crisis, and links the jungles of Cuba with the paddy fields of Vietnam.

It is 1 July 1898 and Willy has joined the advance on San Juan Hill (*WR* 114-132). His retrospective voice is already constructing grand historical continuities around a battle that, thanks to the headline promotion of Roosevelt and his Rough Riders, has come to dominate the popular history of the conflict. This will be 'our Suribachi', Willy says, a reference to the flag-raising on Iwo Jima in February 1945, the staged photo of which has become an enduring emblem of American military determination but also a signal example of deliberate myth-making.

In the confusion, Willy finds himself isolated. And he starts to hallucinate. A dead colleague revives, 'his eyes, they were wide open and covered with crawling ants' and suddenly 'all the dead soldiers in history were screaming in [Willy's] ears'. Willy's long dead uncle Erik, who fought with the Prussians at Waterloo, exhorts him to 'get ahold of yourself and do the right thing. *For your country*. You hear?'. A gender-shifting French general – 'General Marie MacMahon. At your service' – pulls at Willy's fly, points at his/her own blood-soaked genitals and demands Willy 'take care' of him. William Randolph Hearst's paramour Eva Cisneros invites Willy to rape her – 'You *can*. I *want* you to' – and then pushes him away because he is not 'up': 'I will find Richard Harding Davies' she says, 'He will know how to rape'.

⁶⁰ Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (New York: Owl Books, 2007), p.xxiii.

Willy has a predictive (or perhaps, amidst the historical compressions, retrospective) vision of his favourite son Henry who consoles his father that 'you did your best' before accusing him of being '*a goddam yellow belly. I only wish to God a dago had f***ed my mother instead of you!*'.

The episode realises an experience of battlefield panic - 'I was suddenly growing very weak, losing whatever starch had brought me this far' – inside the buffeting, and competing, narratives that combined to take Willy to war in the first place. The references to Cisneros and Harding, for example, invoke the role of the press in constructing the ideological case for mobilisation. Uncle Erik invokes the national narrative of the immigrant obliged to show gratitude for New World opportunity. At the same time, the hallucinatory references to rape and violence identify a darkness inside the American adventure; the aspersions cast on Willy's manliness equivocate over his capacity to realise an exceptionalism whose logical consequence might be aggressive expansionism. Crudely, noble pretensions boil down to raping the other, before the other rapes you. And as the image of Cisneros dissolves, it is the vision of his own son accusing him of cowardice ('I knew darn well he was watching all right') and uncritical obedience – rather than higher national purpose – that drives him back into battle:

What did they know, what did any of them know? Jesus, McKinley should know [...] But he sent me *out* here. So it must be right. Well then, that's it. I have to lay low. Somehow or other I would reorganize my life; that was the main thing now. If only my goddam legs would work.

Willy's battlefield experience also has a more immediately topical resonance. The prose infers the hallucinatory language that, by 1971, was already becoming familiar in the coverage of Vietnam. In his early dispatches, for example, Herr would write of 'mov[-ing] around the war like crazy people until we couldn't see which way the run was even taking us any more', and of soldiers 'painted up for the night, walking now like a bad hallucination'.⁶¹ Walking through My Lai, Tim O'Brien would describe how 'you hallucinate. You look ahead, a few paces and wonder what your legs will resemble if there is more to the earth in that spot than silicates and nitrogen. Will the pain be unbearable? Will you scream or fall silent?'.⁶² The effect is not confined to inscribing a common experience of conflict. It also proposes ideological connections, and shared instabilities, between two campaigns seventy years apart. Cuba 1898 infers the exceptionalism that still drove Vietnam in 1971; the debilitating experience of Vietnam, and its tumbling-over into the unprincipled aggression of, for example, My Lai questions the ultimate ideological legitimacy of 1898, and so on ...

⁶¹ Herr, pp.9,11,7.

⁶² Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (London: Flamingo, 1995), p.126.

Willy's war can never detach itself from and is always implicated in the ironies and anxieties of subsequent events. It expresses a dissonance where personal and national crises coincide. And the fourth layer of Willy's narrative – his disappointed experience of the American Century *after* San Juan Hill – expresses the degree to which that sense of dissonance infected not just America's wars, but a whole trajectory through American life.

2.3.4. A Legacy of Mythological Crisis.

After the fighting on Cuba is over, Willy reflects on the cost: 'history books lay scattered in those pleasant hills and lush jungles and fords and whorehouses and graves' (WR 238). Elsewhere, Willy will ruefully compare his experience as a foot soldier with that of future president Teddy Roosevelt, 'he got all the history books, I got this page' (WR 210). These references to the lessons of history, containing a metafictional interrogation of the *writing* of history, represent an ultimate, and ultimately critical, collapsing-together of the novel's complex swirl of mythical assertions and historical contestations. They constitute a fourth layer which inscribes an explicit contemporary politics into the conflict between lived experience and the promotion of privileged narratives.

Here, the multivalent image of 'history books lay[-ing] scattered' distils the ultimate sense of crisis around which the novel's layers aggregate. In one respect, the phrase suggests an end to history, or at least of an historical *myth*: the notion perhaps that America's vision of itself as a 'City Upon a Hill' has foundered on a battlefield of unclear motives and imperial aggression. In another respect, however, it also suggests a *start* to a history, that a compelling myth has seeded itself in Cuba's 'lush jungles' to then blossom in the present: there were 'pleasant hills and lush jungles' in Vietnam as well. And in a third respect, it captures a sense of historical division: between those who emerged from the battlefield to control the 'history books' and those who simply served and died. In post-war Havana Willy's comrades will complain 'it ain't very historical [...] sittin' on the steps of a whorehouse' while one of their number dies, mid-sex, of a fever inside (WR 227). In sum, the image captures an ultimate sense that the novel is being narrated from a contemporary moment, and a perspective, which is confused and bitter about where it has found itself. Here, once again, Vietnam is inferred as the unspoken target of Willy's retrospective critique.

In the text's consistent referral to Roosevelt and the Rough Riders, the novel attaches its layers of interrogation to a signal instance of political myth-making, and identifies the jeopardies inside its enduring impact on America's subsequent self-perception. As this reified instance of national heroism is variously destabilised by personal repudiation, uncritically

subsumed into grand political projects and exposed as a mediated construction, so it becomes an emblem for an eventual crisis in self-belief: seductive and yet mired in contradiction at the same time.

Newspaper reports from 1898 celebrated Roosevelt's exploits as 'nothing in the pages of Thucydides, nothing can surpass the story' and Roosevelt's own account of the Rough Riders became a bestseller which contributed to his election as president.⁶³ Willy, by contrast, claims Roosevelt 'wrongly got credit for San Juan Hill' and that 'from that day on Teddy was on [his] list' (*WR* 10,58). The event, Willy claims, was a media construction, 'Fort Roosevelt', designed by 'Teddy the Terror' and his 'press agent' – reporter Harding Davis – while the battle itself was 'Misery Hill' won by foot soldiers bypassed by history (*WR* 210). Where Roosevelt 'only fell on the way to the front page', Willy and his fellow doughboys spend the voyage home 'puking, running, yellowing, moaning, bitching, leaking, clutching, dribbling [...] dropping, dying' (*WR* 243,238). Where Roosevelt's 'Fag Riders [...] waltzed into the mess tent and ate eggs and caviar and drank champagne', the doughboys are confined to quarantine in a camp at Montauk, Long Island, where they continued to die.

This retrospective complaint of differentiation acquires a contemporary resonance in the experience of Vietnam veterans who were similarly side-lined when they returned home. It recalls the class warfare that led to 788 'fraggings' – attempts to kill superior officers with fragmentation grenades – between 1969 and 1972. And it anticipates what was, for the U.S. administration in 1971, the uncomfortable spectacle of the Winter Soldier Investigation: its own ex-servicemen putting the nation on public trial for atrocities and war crimes.

Nonetheless Willy's resonant sense of unfairness and disappointment remains a complicitous critique. His own sense of legitimacy lies in the residual conviction that, by fighting against Spain, he was 'chang[-ing] the course of history for this great country' (*WR* 12). To that extent he cannot finally repudiate the political myth inspired by or clustering around Roosevelt without eventually repudiating himself, 'I even voted for him holding my nose' (*WR* 58). And the novel's ultimate expression of crisis is located at the point where Willy's personal and irreconcilable dilemma about how to narrate his own life encounters the seductions of grand mythologies which he already knows, or comes to know, are built on precarious foundations. Willy's post-war conviction that he was among those 'who had kept Uncle Sam's win streak intact' is implicated in the political myth constructed by and around Roosevelt which translated America's foundational exceptionalism into, what Slotkin describes as, a Darwinian narrative where 'heroes emerge [...] from the strife of races to earn a neo-aristocratic right to rule', and where in Roosevelt's own writing America's first settlers were

⁶³ Quoted in Carroll and Noble, p.301.

‘the vanguard of the army of fighting soldiers’, building up power to promote world order as one of ‘the great tasks set modern civilisation’.⁶⁴ At the same time, however, Willy’s ultimate sense of disappointment – invoking as it does the manifold fault-lines that cut through his memoir – inserts itself into a contemporary moment where, as Baritz for example has argued, the precariousness inside the exceptionalist Roosevelt narrative of American history has finally been exposed:

[America] assumed [it] had a superior moral claim to be in Vietnam [...] joining the American sense of its moral superiority with its technological superiority was a marriage made in heaven [...] The inevitable offspring of this marriage [...] was the conviction that the United States could not be beaten in war.⁶⁵

By 1971, the ‘win streak’ that Willy tries to remember and defend had tumbled into the ill-fated invasion of Cambodia and the secret war in Laos by which America sought to force North Vietnam’s hand at the Paris peace talks. The existential impact of Hanoi’s continued resistance to America’s power, affluence and exceptional self-belief forms the backdrop to Faust’s third political novel of the Nixon Years.

2.4. Foreign Devils

Foreign Devils inscribes a third form of historical possibility in critical response to a new and distinctive phase in the Nixon Years’ climate of crisis. Where *The Steagle* traces the fault-lines of 60s disorientation back to the existential challenges of the recent past and *Willy Remembers* illuminates an experience of turn-of-the-decade crisis by dissolving narratives of putative historical legitimacy even as they are invoked, *Foreign Devils* deploys history, or a version of it, as a perceived site of escape in a precarious project of personal and national renewal. The novel’s emphatic metafictional character – its chapters juxtapose a frantic, fragmented present with a fluent novel-within-a-novel set in turn-of-the-century China – and the ultimate perfunctoriness of its resolution throw into critical relief an underlying sense of cultural disintegration, and frame an explicitly interventionist political critique. In this Faust targets Nixon’s foreign policy manoeuvrings of the early 70s as an attempt to secure political advantage by constructing a new narrative of exceptionalism from the battered remnants of the old.

In form, *Foreign Devils* refracts a national climate of eroded self-belief through the interplay between a disorientated protagonist and a president under electoral pressure. In

⁶⁴ Slotkin, p. 35. Roosevelt, p.5.

⁶⁵ Baritz, *Backfire*, pp.33,44,45.

structure, both characters, one a blocked writer, Sidney Birnbaum (pen name *Benson*), the other a quasi-satirical version of Nixon himself, seek to recover a sense of trajectory by variously asserting their narrative influence over a part of the world, the Orient, whose signal resistance to American objectives, in Vietnam, had destabilised the national mission. And in sum, the novel's metafictional play between Birnbaum's fictional delusions and Nixon's vote-seeking assertions exposes the mythical assumptions, and the climate of desperate anxiety, which combine to construct an historic moment of political decision-making: Nixon's landslide re-election in November 1972.

Foreign Devils is set against Nixon's trip to China in February 1972, an event designed to reinforce America's global prestige as it struggled to achieve an elusive peace with Hanoi. Looking towards the American Bicentennial in 1976, Nixon had pledged to supplant the turmoil of the 60s, 'one of the most tortured decades in [America's] history', by reviving the national narrative, 'the old Spirit of '76 [...] the strength of character, the idealism, the faith in our founding purposes that that spirit represents'.⁶⁶

Faust's protagonist embodies that sense of torture. Frustrated writer, failed husband, would-be big-band clarinettist, Sidney is a man of fragments: 'you're driving everyone including yourself nuts' he tells himself, and the competing voices inside his head, as the novel starts.⁶⁷ And as Nixon's revivalist mission to Beijing plays out across the media, so Birnbaum is inspired to embark on a revivalist mission of his own. He imagines himself as a daring reporter, Norris Blake, galloping through China some seventy years before, witnessing and starring in America's first historical engagement in Beijing: the Boxer siege of the great power legations in the summer of 1900.

Birnbaum's novel-within-a-novel – as energetically purposeful as his own life is haltingly chaotic – is a wilful denial of the tribulations of Vietnam, an escape into what he calls 'a fictionally orientated history' where the Orient bent to America's will, as opposed to defying it (*FD* 58). In its breathless romanticism, and nostalgia for a Hollywood version of an Orient that never was, it questions not only Nixon's specific electoral project, but the broader susceptibility to myths of American distinctiveness that Nixon called upon.

Faust's novels of the Nixon Years deploy different forms of metafictional construction to mediate a changing balance between myth and history in response to crisis. Where *The Steagle's* frantic fantasies translate an incommensurable history of threatened destruction into an exuberance of overweening national confidence, the contrasting coherence and illusory

⁶⁶ Richard Nixon, 'Address on the State of the Union Delivered Before a Joint Session of Congress, 20 January 1972', in *APP* [accessed 28 June 2015]

⁶⁷ Irvin Faust, *Foreign Devils* (New York: Arbor House, 1973), p.14. Hereafter *FD*.

completeness of Foreign Devils' historical story invokes the worrying suggestion that political myth-making alone might eventually reconcile dark contradictions into an uncontested exceptionalism. Where *Willy Remembers* sits at the eye of a divisive Vietnam storm, *Foreign Devils* fuses imagined past and anxious present into a narrative closure so emphatically neat as to infer a continuing crisis wilfully denied, rather than a national self-belief restored. In short, *Foreign Devils* critically addresses the political fusing of history and myth into an ontological zone of illusory trajectory where a weary America might seek refuge from the enervating realities of its early 70s present.

2.4.1. Contemporary Chaos.

The contemporary sections of *Foreign Devils* conjoin a country, a president and a protagonist into an interpenetrating inscription of crisis. On the New York streets, Columbia University students are protesting the high-altitude bombing that was America's last-ditch strategy to disrupt the mass NVA offensive of 1972: 'Daddy, what did you do when they rained bombs on the poor peasants?' (FD 173). Richard Nixon is 'globe-trotting and changing' to get himself, as Birnbaum notes, 're-elected' (FD 93). And Birnbaum himself is in chaos, his discourse a hard-to-navigate torrent of creative anxiety, filial and uxorial guilt, imagined voices and contemporary disorientation.

In one characteristic passage, fantasies about China drift into nostalgia for his Jewish parents and then on into an internal debate about the patriotism, or otherwise, of his views on South East Asia:

I never touch coffee or tea, they are imperialist products – I read about ping pong. Pong ping. Ho hum, what else is new? Izzy and Birnbaum played this unknown exotic game in '32 on Hannah's dining room table [...] what else is new? The NVN offensive ... Not again ... Yes, again ... All right, face it: curious gut reaction. Curious? You? [...] Curious haha or curious strange? All right, you asked for it, I'm rooting for them. You're what! You heard me, for the first time in my life, Izzy and Birney should only forgive me, but I am, I hope they win. (FD 172)

By comparison with his earlier novels however, where such fragmentary prose seems to swirl away into irresolution, Faust here emphatically foregrounds the self-conscious strategies his characters deploy to impose trajectory on their sense of crisis. *Foreign Devils'* overall tone is of exhaustion, of wanting the chaos to end: the city's graffiti talks of 'U.S. gives up' and 'Right on take Saigon'; Birnbaum himself needs to write again, 'why've you been going nuts for five years if not for this?' (FD 173,29). And in drawing deliberate attention to the roles both

Birnbaum and Nixon construct for themselves, the novel conflates issues of personal and political momentum while simultaneously exposing the instabilities inside the expedient fictions both characters adopt to quieten the turbulence.

In this, Sidney's writer's block becomes a metafictionally explicit expression of personal inertia in response to existential siege. And overcoming it, inspired by Nixon, expresses a metafictional desperation to escape and move forward, regardless. The intensities of the novel's opening chapter juxtapose the presidential initiative, 'Nixon, the Foreign Devil, re-enters the Forbidden City. After 72 years', with Sidney's determination to re-start his life, 'close your eyes, hold your nose, grab air and jump', and together they plunge the reader into a dense aggregation of references, historical fragments, media images, and autobiographical intrusions as if to implicate all three – president, protagonist and reader - in a concerted attempt to recover their narrative bearings (*FD* 13-16).

Thus Sidney nervously self-narrates ('you're screwing off again. Oh don't get so goddam sore, I was just streaming a little, don't you recognise my highly lauded style yet?'), fights to render coherent scraps of discontinuous research ('Chinese Gordon and the Opium War and Marshall and Wedemeyer and Pat Hurley and Chiang and the Long March and *The General Died at Dawn* ...') and struggles to find a sustainable verisimilitude in the historical character he will create to sublimate his contemporary anxieties: 'Let's see, he needs a good waspy name [...] they didn't have yiddle reporters back then [...] Well, get a B in there, yes let the Ph.D.'s play with that. B. Bakely, Blakely. Blake'. Significantly, the opening chapter culminates in Sidney's metafictional determination that 'there has to be *continuity* (italics mine)' in Norris' 'dispatches, by-lines': 'he's writing a book? [...] Go. Interweaves dispatches in this book. Go. *And* then his own novel. Well maybe. Whythehell not? A novel in a novel in a novel'.

Sidney's, and indeed Faust's, pronounced self-consciousness meanwhile, in which the proxy role played by Blake in a strategy of crisis avoidance is barely disguised, has an explicitly political as well as an existential resonance. It is Nixon who has set the story going: 'there you've done it!' says Sidney excitedly, 'You've made the connection, that wasn't so godawful was it?' (*FD* 13-14). And in the novel's presentation of Nixon in China as a man reconfiguring his personal narrative alongside his electoral ambitions, Faust inscribes an unstable ecology where issues of national belief, immediate political circumstances and intractable private anxieties are linked into a volatile *fictional* conversation between proxies.

The image, for example, of Nixon shaking hands with Mao Zedong on 21 February 1972 did much to re-affirm the President's self-image as a determined leader:

What counts is whether the individual used what chances he had. Did he risk all when the stakes were such that he might win or lose all? Did he affirmatively seek the opportunities to use his talents to be utmost in causes that went beyond personal and family considerations?⁶⁸

In Sidney's rendition of the last-night banquet in Shanghai however, Nixon's public declaration of renewed U.S. global leadership betrays a private hinterland of dark turbulence. Amid references to Nixon's 1952 'Checkers' defence against allegations of expenses fraud, the presidential toast becomes a crude statement of political triumphalism ('Who [...] would ever have thought I would have been here after being shafted in 1960 and '62?') and vulgar racism ('I then read avidly [...] such works as *The Yellow Stream*, by I.P. Daily [...] and *The Spot on the Wall*, by Hoo Flung Shit') culminating in a perversion of personal and national exceptionalism:

So at this high tide of history, at the climax of the week that will change the world from the year of the rat to the generation of the swan, that will create for us millions of temples of heavenly peace, I want to and will propose a toast. To all those people who made me eat the material with which you fertilize your land: Up yours with gauze for the cause! (FD 55-57)

At issue here is less Nixon's cynicism, than the degree to which the self-serving transparency of his political strategy nonetheless constitutes a revivalist rallying-point. Sidney recognises that Nixon is a 'sonofabitch' but is still inspired to imagine his own complementary narrative of oriental self-assertion. The political force of the novel lies in the extent to which its characters pursue their fictions despite the manifold instabilities, personal, cultural, historical, which continue to insert themselves. *Foreign Devils'* rendering of crisis is inscribed into the way its mythical-historical story attempts to evade, but ultimately cannot resist, crisis' relentless presence. And the novel's nagging sense of sustained precariousness is contained first in the problematic assumptions that surround Sidney's, and Nixon's, choice of revivalist location: China, itself.

2.4.2. China: A Proxy for Vietnam.

Sidney's fictional projection of himself as the daring reporter who confronts, seduces and earns the ultimate respect of the anti-Western Boxer insurgency is not limited to the transparent degree to which it sublimates personal disorientation into the proxy wish-fulfilment of an American victory in Vietnam. China in *Foreign Devils* is a complex ontological zone which fuses together contemporary politics and national mythology, and the cultural assumptions which mediate, but eventually destabilise, the interrelationship between the two.

⁶⁸ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1962), p.xvi.

In historical and political terms, America's foray into China as one of the 'great powers' in the late 1800s and Nixon's return there in 1972 were linked by a combination of exceptionalist thinking, and simple expediency. President McKinley's 'open door' policy of 1898 was designed to secure U.S. economic advantage, 'fair and equal competition in the vast trade of the Orient', by extending, and involving China in, America's global vision for itself: what A.E. Campbell describes as a 'dream [of American expansion] that did not stop at the Pacific' which realised the 'myth of manifest destiny [with] the United States seated between east and west'.⁶⁹ Seventy years later, China was key to Nixon and Kissinger's policy of tripartite diplomacy, also involving the Soviets, which would restore America's battered prestige and remove a blockage to peace in Vietnam. Success there helped turn Nixon's declining approval ratings – less than 50% before the trip, 56% immediately after – into re-election in November 1972.⁷⁰ As such, China is both an early staging-post in the adventure that culminated in Vietnam, and a proxy site for that adventure's latter-day revivification, what Spanos calls an 'exceptionalist Cold War Orientalism'.⁷¹

In *Foreign Devils* however the significance of China for American policy and its emblematic significance in the construction of American systems of belief are pointedly destabilised in Faust's critique of crisis denial. Here, contemporary events and Sidney's imagined version of history engage in a circular, mutually amplifying conversation which elides the real with the fictional, and politics with desire.

Consider for example China's presentation as a media event. 'Three days ago' we are told, 'the President's advance party left for Peking'; there is excitement at Nixon's history-making audacity, 'It is the first time since '49 Americans have pierced the holy gates'; and 'Channel 5 has a special. So does 13 with James Mason narrating' (FD 13,14,27). This is China as a flow of images, a waning of historicity where a distinctive culture (and a politics) is subsumed into a piece of electoral theatre. Indeed, Sidney notes that James Mason is narrating 'simplistic T.V. history' before tuning in nonetheless to Nixon's visit as peak-time drama, 'the countdown has begun. He leaves this week [...] He's off today' (FD 27,29). This sense of complicity, of being knowingly but enthusiastically implicated in a flawed conception, extends into Sidney's vision of himself as turn-of-the-century reporter.

⁶⁹ William McKinley, 'Address Accepting the Republic Presidential Nomination, 12 July 1900' in *APP* [accessed 30 June 2015]. A.E.Campbell, 'Great Britain and the United States in the Far East, 1895-1903', *The Historical Journal*, 1 (1958), 154-75 (p.154).

⁷⁰ Statistic from the Presidential Approval datasets at *Roper Centre Public Opinion Archives* < <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/> [accessed 10 March 2016]. Nixon's re-election was also aided by the chaotic campaign of his Democrat challenger George McGovern.

⁷¹ Spanos, *American Exceptionalism*, pp.57-99. See also Hellmann, pp.4-5.

As Blake, he eulogises ‘the openness and the honesty’ of the U.S. and of its ‘civilising efforts’ against ‘the Boxers. The terrible villains of our chronicle’ (FD 40,18,24). At the same time, he moves seamlessly between his own hunger for vainglorious headlines – ‘**Blake Be-Devils Boxers**’, as he confronts an insurrectionist leader, ‘**Reporter Runs Remarkable Risk**’ – and a ready acknowledgement that he is part of a media war which seeks to profit from America’s geopolitical strategies: ‘my employer Joseph Pulitzer, almost single-handedly delivered the oppressed Cubans and Philipinos from tyrannical masters and in doing so proved forever that the pen is mightier than the sword’ (FD 99,104).

The sense that China has been precariously constructed as an exotic stage for the performance of American priorities, not least with the Boxers as proxies for the Vietcong, is underlined by the degree to which past and present are conjoined in a casual, Hollywood orientalism. In 70s New York, Sidney conflates film of Chinese premier Chou En-Lai, ‘uncle Chou blinks’, with ‘*The Bitter Tea of General Yen* and *The General Died at Dawn*. Nils Asther blinks. Coop makes a great speech on freedom. Akim Tamiroff, American-Russian, playing the Chinese warlord, smirks. He knows his spheres of influence’ (FD 48). This is China appropriated into a movie-set of American desires: Gary Cooper as mercenary-cum-cowboy fighting for the peasants in *The General Died at Dawn* (1936) and re-enacting a war of independence against General Yang’s (Tamiroff) reign of terror; missionary Barbara Stanwyck struggling with transgressive sexual fantasy as she seeks to redeem a brutal warlord in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933).

The volatile link between exoticism and exceptionalism translates into Sidney/Norris’ exercises of self-promoting dominance in the novel-within-the-novel. Where Sidney wanders the streets ‘looking for a little contact with the opposite sex’, and ends up with a knee in the groin, Norris seduces a Boxer goddess who recalls Anna May Wong in *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931): ‘I have never known such ecstasy’ she says (FD 31,163). Where Sidney cowers in front of his mother, Norris repudiates a grotesque flirtation by the Dowager Empress as she flees Beijing with the declaration ‘I am an *American*’ (FD 288). The novel projects a faux-historical China as a form of ‘safe-zone’ for America’s encounter with the Other, an ontological space where transgressive eroticism can be safely sampled and savagery successfully faced down: a proxy for a Vietnam that continued to resist American intentions.

And by 1973, the particular political significance and mythological implications of the Boxer rebellion had already been recovered from historical obscurity and popularly re-configured into the American Century’s narrative of exceptionalism. In what is in many ways an intertext for Faust’s novel, Nick Ray’s lavish *55 Days at Peking* (1963) had already reframed the 1900 Boxer siege of the foreign legations as an *American* story. The film’s parallels with

the early 60s phase of the Vietnam adventure are unmistakable. Charlton Heston's U.S. marines ride into Beijing just as Kennedy's Green Berets had arrived in Saigon in 1961; the low angle shot of the towering, Stetson-wearing star advertising the arrival of the enlightened cowboy onto the stage of world affairs. 'You're not in the Wild West now you know', the old world British diplomat David Niven advises the rugged new world Heston, 'You don't go round shooting Chinese like you do Red Indians'.⁷² The Boxers are defeated, the great powers' influence over China is consolidated, and Heston sweeps out of Beijing, scooping a half-Chinese half-American orphan onto his horse, in a resolution which captures exceptionalism's self-image of rugged ingenuity mixed with compassion.

In *Foreign Devils*, Sidney channels Heston's enlightened cowboy into Blake as his alter ego gallops determinedly across China. But ten years on, American global ambitions are struggling to reassert themselves and the voices inside Sidney's head are linking his exotic fantasies with what has become an existential and political crisis. 'What happened to your empire?' asks a voice. 'Point of fact' Sidney replies in hope, 'the world has never been the same since we lost it. I'm waiting [for] a renaissance. The greatest of all empires [...] they'll welcome us with open arms' (*FD* 174-5).

2.4.3. A Crisis 'Denied'.

Faust's metafictional engagements with history collectively survey the crisis climate of the Nixon years and individually explore distinct phases in a deepening disorientation. In *Foreign Devils*, however, the ultimate suspensiveness of the previous novels is emphatically contested. Its metafictional texture functions less as an interrogation of the constructions of myth or the contestations inside historical assumptions and more as a pronounced determination to *evade* the lessons of the past. Here, the notions of 'empire' and 'renaissance' conjoin Nixon politically and Sidney personally into the re-assertion of a perceived historical continuity, despite its baggage of real-world contradictions and cultural delusions. But here too, the sheer perfunctoriness of the novel's final movements serves only to highlight the underlying sense of crisis Nixon's politics of exceptionalist revival sought to displace.

It is not as if Sidney is unaware of the ultimate contradictions in the history he invokes, or in the alternative 'non-Vietnam' Orient he imagines. Blake reports that, before arriving in China, American troops brutally crushed a nationalist rebellion in the newly conquered Philippines, having taken up 'the White Man's Burden [to] nobly uplift our little brown brothers [...] with a vengeance' (*FD* 17). Sidney himself refers to the 'atrocities' in the

⁷² *55 Days at Peking*, dir. by Nicholas Ray (Allied Artists Pictures, 1963). TC: 00:32:06:00.

Philippines, 'the water cure, the neck cure, the dum dum bullets' and 'tie[s] them up with MyLai (sic)' (FD 15). And in post-Boxer China, American forces and even missionaries were implicated in looting and racist violence, episodes condemned by Mark Twain: 'we have debauched America's honour and blackened her face before the world'.⁷³ At the same time however Norris the reporter, serving Pulitzer's exceptionalist agenda, condemns those who rebel against America's 'civilising efforts' as 'insufferable and brutal ingrates' (FD 18).

To the extent that Sidney/Norris cannot escape these contradictions, he channels an America riven by Vietnam which, by 1973, was killing civilians in high altitude bombing even as it sued for peace. To the extent however that Sidney's historical adventure also leaves him 'hungrier, happier, healthier', the novel deliberately juxtaposes the seductions of narrative – especially those that mythologise history – with the nagging complexities of a disorientating present: 'this book is transforming me, it really is' Sidney tells his estranged wife (FD 57,118). And it is by foregrounding the degree to which political and historical contradictions are ultimately rationalised into narratives which metafictionally adjudicate on, but ultimately deny, their own jeopardy that the novel passes judgement on Sidney's, and America's, delusions, even as Nixon sought to re-assert a collective self-belief.

That sense of jeopardy is highlighted by an incident in contemporary New York where Sidney, inspired by his alter ego's seduction of the Boxer goddess but aware too that the fiction is 'an instrument of sexual revenge' for his present problems, nonetheless succumbs to a yearning for a real-life version of his historical fantasy, 'for gentian violet eyes, for perfumed silk-clad legs' (FD 169,181-3). Sidney conflates fiction with fact as he introduces himself to a potential target, 'my name is Norris Blake. May I escort you home?'. Fact however aggressively reasserts itself over fiction as the girl announces she is a modern Chinese-American, her boyfriend intervenes, and Sidney retreats into the self-justifying prejudices of his own version of history to deflect his contemporary humiliation:

I looked up at three oriental faces [...]
 "Murderous Boxers," I muttered.
 "What?"
 "You're a lousy Boxer."

It is in the determination of the novel's ending however that this sense of jeopardy – a blurring of fact and potentially corrosive fiction – is translated from personal delusion into a wider, national politics. *Foreign Devils'* emphatically metafictional final movement situates

⁷³ Mark Twain, 'To The Person Sitting in Darkness', in *The North American Review*, 531 (1901), 161-176 (p.174).

Sidney's individual exceptionalist escape inside an even broader system of national belief and re-affirms his implication in the revivalist politics promoted by Nixon.

The novel actually offers two endings. In the first, Sidney suddenly diverts from China and inserts another story-within-a-story: a coming-of-age tale set in post-war Europe where a Sidney proxy experiences his first love, and his first sex. In the second ending, Sidney travels across America for an encounter with his errant father. In its pronounced metafictionality, recalling for example the '186,000 endings per second' of Brautigan's *A Confederate General From Big Sur* (1964), Faust's forked-path ending dramatises the aesthetic conflict between lived complexity and narrative constructedness.⁷⁴ The voices in Sidney's head actively debate the ontological status of the European story, 'reality has been transmuted', its textual processes, 'I *know* I have to do it third person', and critically its viability as a conclusion:

Anyway I got a story out of it
 Oh, that you did
 [...] I know which version I prefer.
 Oh? Which?
 The next one. (FD 262,232,263)

Unlike Brautigan, however, Faust deliberately sidesteps an ultimate suspensiveness which suggests an early 60s climate of exhilarating possibility in favour of an outcome which actively ignores history's contradictions, a process of closing-down which reconciles a *version* of history to the demands of a more enervating mid-70s politics. In short, the perfunctory opting for 'the next one', Sidney's reconciliation with his father, effectively displaces jeopardy and crisis into an illusion of reassurance where Sidney's mythical history of China and his personal search for stability discover an uneasy correspondence.

Critics have condemned the novel's conclusion as a 'particularly sticky reunion'.⁷⁵ But while this recognises the degree to which Sidney's sudden departure from New York seems thinly motivated, it ignores the degree to which the circumstances of the reunion deliberately foreground a rich connectivity between private fiction and national myth.

Suddenly, after the restless intensities of New York, the reader is carried west into American space, and towards the historical frontier. In Albuquerque, New Mexico the streets of 'Old Town, Spanish Town, Tourist Town' still resonate to the popular culture of America's early national definition: 'Rio Rita, The Three Caballeros [...] The Cisco Kid' – movie tales of Texas lawmen, patriotic Disney characters, and cowboy Robin Hoods civilising an unruly West (FD 271). Sidney's father's favourite actor is the first Cisco Kid, Warren Baxter, and Isidore

⁷⁴ Richard Brautigan, *A Confederate General From Big Sur* (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc., 1999), p.149.

⁷⁵ Sale, p.835.

Birnbaum himself, huddled in a backstreet apartment, has become a living canvas for an iconography of American national ideas: 'he was wearing a shirt with a huge thunderbird on the chest. Around his neck a string tie [...] The shirtsleeves were rolled up. The tattoo of the flag and Miss Liberty rested on the arms of the chair' (FD 272).

The novel has entered the frontier space where America forged its territorial sense of identity and where popular culture continues to assert its sense of exceptionalism. Sidney engages his father in patriotic songs, 'My Country 'Tis of Thee' and 'Trail the Eagle', the anthem of the American Boy Scouts (FD 273-4). And here Sidney seeks to effect a merging of foundational mythology with an uncritical version of his own proxy role in an American-centric version of Chinese history as if to subsume all three, his anxious self, his errant stars-and-stripes bedecked father and a country whose self-image has been rocked by Vietnam, into a collective process of recovery.

Sidney tries to connect with his father around his 'terrific novel' about China (FD 275). In doing so however he finally, and critically, effaces the textual separation that has hitherto struggled to distinguish present-day fact from escapist (meta-)fiction. The novel-within-a-novel slips, inside one paragraph, from third-person distance – 'This reporter, he's talking about Peking now' – into the immediate first-person – 'I reached Peking on June 18' (FD 275-6). Sidney becomes Blake, and Blake Sidney, in a sudden collapsing of history and fiction where an idealised American adventure displaces the anxieties of the present in an ontological zone where America's foundational myths first declared themselves. The Boxer siege in Beijing suddenly becomes a source-point for the American Century, anticipating 'Hitler's last gasp at the [Battle of the] Bulge'; the American role in the relief column that eventually scattered the Boxers in 1900 is 'like 1945 and Europe all over again' (FD 281-2). Blake/Sidney meanwhile imagines himself at the forefront of American global influence when he personally accepts the surrender of the fleeing Empress Dowager who throws herself 'on the tender mercies of the victors. In particular the Americans' (FD 288). Sidney's entire conflation of pseudo-history, myth and self-legitimation culminates in an assertion of itself as unmitigated contemporary *fact*: 'What do you think of that, Pop, a *worldwide exclusive*' with Sidney/Blake himself as a dominating 'reporter to the world' (FD 290,293).

In one key respect, *Foreign Devils* ends in an assertive act of crisis denial. The destabilisations inferred in its metafictional juxtaposition of disorientating contemporary events with compensatory fictions are absorbed into a narrative outcome which sidesteps its own constructions and its historical contradictions and fixes itself instead inside a foundational, but continuing, myth of providential destiny. From Founding Fathers to a rapprochement with the authority of his own father. So perceived, the novel's ending appears

to complete the political project which inspired its start: just as Nixon's trip to China sought to reinvigorate American self-belief before an election, and the Bicentennial, so Sidney's trip to China refracts national ambitions into their personal complement.

But the sheer audacity of Sidney's process of displacement, its perfunctory sense of *completeness*, deepens rather than alleviates the novel's political critique of periodic crisis. Faust leaves the reader with a glaring sense of disjuncture between Sidney's promotion of his own, and America's, exceptionalism and its residual denials. The father Sidney seeks to impress meets his son with 'empty eyes'; his symbol bedecked body is moribund, 'a string of split dropped to his chin' (FD 273,294). And Isidore Birnbaum only manages one word in response to Sidney's grandiloquent vision of personal and national recovery, 'Curtains', as if to suggest it is all over.

Irvin Faust barely features in the critical literature on postmodernism. And yet, as this analysis has sought to demonstrate, his sensitivity to a contemporary play around signal events in America's past, his insights into the power of America myth and his technique of combining both in evolving, and critically responsive, forms of metafiction adds a political urgency, and a sense of activism, to how postmodernism's engagement with history has been interpreted hitherto. Faust renders more topically acute, for example, the assumption that postmodernist political writing on history is restricted to the broadly conceptual questions of Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction: 'the [epistemological] nature of historical knowledge', 'the systems of representation which [...] grant meaning within a particular society'.⁷⁶ By closing in on contemporary events and the ways in which they are mediated into popular culture, by exploring the struggle there between history-as-lived and the constructions of myth, he is able to test the nature of particular and proximate political agendas, and open up space for political engagement in his registration of contradictions and discontents.

In his emphasis on Vietnam, however, Faust goes beyond simple protest. Rather he homes in on a vexed conversation inside the national psyche about the very terms and objectives of American life, and on how crisis emerges at the point where a national predilection for myth collides with the actual experience of history. From inspiring national over-reach in *The Steagle*, to creating cognitive dissonance in *Willy Remembers*, to finally providing an illusory site of psychic refuge in *Foreign Devils*: Faust tracks the myth of exceptionalism's impact on, and influence over, the American perception of history from the

⁷⁶ Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, pp.63,8.

exhilaration of the early 60s to an early 70s where, according to Michael Kammen, it collapsed into 'a feeling of embarrassment with American chauvinism and parochialism'.⁷⁷

Faust's interrogation of exceptionalism however is not rooted solely in metafiction. He also invokes those ontological zones where exceptionalism drives America's process of historical and territorial definition. In Weissburg's foray into the Las Vegas desert, in Willy's confused sense of himself as a foot-soldier of Manifest Destiny, and in Birnbaum's final act of self-assertion at the (popular cultural) western edge of America, Faust also refers his critique of American ideology back to America's foundational negotiation with geographical space and the formation of its frontiers.

The nature of these ontological zones is explored in more detail in the novels of Rudolph Wurlitzer. In the next chapter, I will examine Wurlitzer's three Nixon Years novels and argue that each of them – by turns countercultural odyssey, post-apocalyptic science fiction and dystopian urban thriller – inscribes a latter-day errand into America's foundational wilderness whose political purpose is to strip back, and lay bare the contestations inside, Kennedy's decade-defining promise of a New American Frontier.

⁷⁷ Kammen, p.16.

Chapter Three

Rudolph Wurlitzer, the American West and a Crisis at the New Frontier

If the myth of exceptionalism expresses a belief in distinctive national purpose, then the American West is where the exceptionalist narrative found its historical nation-building application. The foundational 'errand into the wilderness' realised its early theological and political objectives in the expansion of the western frontier, at what Spanos calls 'the fluid boundary between "savagery" and "civilisation," threatening forest and secure settlement, diabolic enemies and supportive friends'.¹ In the beckoning opportunities of the western landscape, and in the historical struggle to control its receding edge, American culture has mythologised national space. Frederick Jackson Turner, originator of the 'frontier thesis', argued that U.S. democracy itself was 'fundamentally the outcome of the experiences of the American people in dealing with the West'.² And in 1960, the perceived need to overcome a periodic 'slippage in [America's] intellectual and moral strength' prompted Kennedy – standing in Los Angeles at 'what was once the last frontier' – to call for a re-energised consensus around a project of national revival:

From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West [...] and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier - the frontier of the 1960s: a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils; a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats.³

Rudolph Wurlitzer's Nixon Years novels insert themselves critically into the volatilities of – and enervating fall-out from – that decade-defining political moment. *Nog* (1968), *Flats* (1970) and *Quake* (1972) interrogate the mythical value of the encounter with the historical West by speculating on its latter-day consequences; they contest the assertion that the frontier was a site of benign progress; and sequentially they question what a New Frontier dispensation might actually come to *mean*, if re-mapped onto the history of the Old.

Wurlitzer's novels advance this thesis' argument in two ways. First, they add another layer to the cluster of mythologies whose periodic contestations eventuated in a climate of political crisis. By contrast with Faust's critique of exceptionalism however, Wurlitzer is less concerned with disrupting the perceived links between past precedents and present policy, than with interrogating the very formation of foundational postures. Against a variety of

¹ Spanos, *American Exceptionalism*, p.196.

² Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, p.266.

³ John. F. Kennedy, 15 July 1960.

renderings of America-as-blank-canvas – a blasted wasteland in *Flats*, a devastated L.A. in *Quake* – Wurlitzer inscribes a series of latter-day returns to the first ‘errand into the wilderness’. He reimagines the raw conditions of a primal encounter with a vast western landscape, sublime and threatening by turns, whose precarious surrender to the early settlers’ control has subsequently been mythologised, and legitimised, as the advance of American civilisation. Kennedy’s exhortation resonates through the novels’ background noise as the rehearsal of a myth whose ironic capacity to deliver crisis, rather than reassurance, is always already contained in the contestations that emerge as its original conditions are re-visited.

Wurlitzer’s concern with the volatilities inside political myth is mediated meanwhile through a distinctiveness of form, a second advance in this thesis’ argument. Where Faust’s prose overflows into a swirl of fragments and factoids, Wurlitzer’s is elliptical and elusive, suggesting a series of near spontaneous encounters with an ontological zone where both history and familiar cultural co-ordinates have either receded or been effaced. In *Nog*, for example, the narrator’s first foray into landscape is present-tense, tentative and circular:

But now there is a clearing. There are trees and the cold stars. There is the smell of the earth, and the moaning of the river. I want to back up, not let a memory slip into this clearing, to push it all back [...] I am in the middle of a soft insidious hush, aware only that something is impending, that nothing has been pushed backward or forward.⁴

Where Faust’s protagonists have rich backstories and seek the legitimacy of privileged historical or mythical narratives, Wurlitzer’s narrators suggest fluid, emerging consciousnesses stumbling through a continuous present. Memory, in *Flats*, becomes a site of speculation where a motile narrative voice seeks or constructs resources for tackling the next random encounter:

Call me Memphis. There was that moment when I nodded off. I can refer back to that. But Memphis is the last place I started from. Not that I haven’t located myself in a host of places: Toledo, Denver, Tucumcari, El Paso. But to tell it like it comes, as if from a direction, let it be Memphis. Memphis: a root, a pretension.⁵

In Faust, America’s turn-of-the-decade crisis is mediated through metafiction which interrogate a proximate tussle between myth and history for control of the national narrative. In Wurlitzer by contrast a sense of crisis is mediated through a process of ontological stripping-back. By imagining a series of *alternative* Americas, where the national landscape is

⁴ Rudolph Wurlitzer, *Nog* (San Diego: Two Dollar Radio, 2009), p.69. Hereafter *Nog*.

⁵ Rudolph Wurlitzer, *Flats* (London: Serpent’s Tail Midnight Classics, 1996), p.8. Hereafter *Flats*.

encountered as if anew, he is able to probe the assumptions surrounding national foundation in the absence of – and in defiance of – its subsequent cultural and historical accretions. The mythology of the West is dismantled in writing which simultaneously registers the ellipses in emerging narratives that struggle to cohere as they encounter the unpredictable conditions at the frontier's edge and which inscribes the fractures in cherished narratives of progress and civilisation that struggle to retain credibility in the face of renewed primal exposure.

In 1969, Rudolph Wurlitzer said 'it seems to me that the further one explores a contemporary dilemma, the more one is presented with a spatial problem'.⁶ In the work discussed here, the 'spatial problem' is the debate over the meaning of American space itself and the myths ascribed to it. This was a time when Vietnam was seen as the latest expression of the foundational frontier encounter, with the Green Beret as the cowboy hero reincarnate. Nixon, also in 1969, would summon up an idealistic narrative of historic expansion to defend the retention of American troops in South East Asia: 'let historians not record that when America was the most powerful nation in the world we [...] allowed the last hopes for peace and freedom of millions of people to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism'.⁷ And it was a time when New Frontier *domestic* policies sought to tackle civil unrest, especially over race, by displacing the boundaries that divided rich from poor.

Each of Wurlitzer's novels offers a different, but complementary, take on how a newly reminted national idea, designed to help Americans who had 'lost their way, their will and their historic sense of purpose', eventuated in its crisis reverse.⁸ Where Faust locates that disorientation in the emergence and erosion of a heady exceptionalist self-assurance, Wurlitzer catalogues the intrinsic instabilities inside the foundational experience, the advance westward, which underscored exceptionalist convictions in the first place.

⁶ Rudolph Wurlitzer interviewed by the *Rutgers Anthologist* in 1969, quoted in David Seed, *Rudolph Wurlitzer, American Novelist and Screenwriter* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1991), pp.152-167 (p.153).

⁷ Richard M. Nixon, 'Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam, 3 November 1969', in *APP* [accessed 1 June 2016]

⁸ John F. Kennedy, 15 July 1960.

3.1. Wurlitzer and the Ontology of American Space.

Wurlitzer himself saw his Nixon Years novels as 'a sort of trilogy'.⁹ They all explored 'the deconstruction of traditional narratives' and were sensitive to a 'time of great adversity [...] political upheaval with Vietnam and all kinds of demonstrations such as Kent State': the intensities of the Nixon Years. Critics have debated however whether he is solely concerned with experimentation, or whether his 'deconstructions' might infer political engagement.

Early commentary focused on various forms of modish subjectivity. For Jonathan Raban *Nog's* elusiveness expressed the 60s counterculture, 'it advances across its America of the mind in a series of hallucinogenic dissolves'.¹⁰ Poirier saw the novel self-consciously resisting coherent narrative and external reference: 'it shapes itself around its own dissolvents; it calls into question not any particular structures so much as the enterprise, the activity itself, of creating any literary form'.¹¹ Morris Dickstein saw Wurlitzer's 'drifter mentality' inscribing 'the debris of a culture without meaning or satisfaction' in 'catatonic' characters whose individuality had disappeared into a 'primal slime'.¹² Nathan Scott, however, would later position him alongside Barth and Coover as a metafictionist.¹³ While for Brooke-Rose and Russell he is a 'neo-surrealist'.¹⁴

In Douglass Bolling's more detailed analysis, Wurlitzer uses form proto-politically to express a climate of crisis. *Nog* and *Flats* 'take us to the heart of the American malaise', deploying textual disruptions to 'to re-examine the American dream in the light of present realities'.¹⁵ *Nog*, Bolling argues, inscribes 'a final involvement [...] with the frightening terrain which has become America'; *Flats* describes 'the death of culture' and 'the figures who grovel and mumble through [its pages] symbolise at once the human project of positing meaning on the world and the futility of the project'.¹⁶ What culture has died, and why America has become frightening are not however explained. A similar sense of generalised malaise informs Bolling's analysis of *Quake* which exposes 'the profound disorder and anarchy below the

⁹ Theodor Hamm, 'Rudy Wurlitzer with Theodore Hamm: In conversation', *The Brooklyn Rail*, (December 2009-January 2010), <<http://brooklynrail.org/2009/12/express/rudy-wurlitzer-with-theodore-hamm>> [accessed 12 March 2011]

¹⁰ Jonathan Raban, 'Tobacco Strands', *New Statesman*, 79 (1970), p.89.

¹¹ Poirier, pp.26-7.

¹² Morris Dickstein, *The Gates of Eden* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp.231,227.

¹³ Scott, p.588.

¹⁴ Brooke-Rose, p.349. Russell, p.267.

¹⁵ Douglass Bolling, 'Rudolph Wurlitzer's *Nog* and *Flats*', *Critique*, 14 (1973), 5-15 (p.5).

¹⁶ Bolling, 'Nog and Flats', pp.5,8,2.

surface of American society' and lays 'bare the pre-existent, "normal" derangements and vacuities of our society and its collective psyche'.¹⁷

In his 1991 book-length study of Wurlitzer, David Seed describes *Nog* as a 'taxing and austere novel' which inscribes 'the breakdown of cultural forms' and which, in its allusions to cowboy movies, oppositionally invokes and contests the popular mythology of the West, 'erod[ing] the patterns of the Western and similarly [exposing] its references to the mythic figure of the pioneer [as] consciously fictive'.¹⁸ And to that extent Seed identifies an incipient politics in Wurlitzer's novels. They are, he argues, critically engaged with a particularly *American* arrangement of cultural co-ordinates: Wurlitzer is an explorer of sublime frontier landscape, poised precariously between two contrasting perceptions of American space as a site of expansive opportunity. In one respect, he is a successor to Whitman, for whom the open American road offered an unalloyed freedom for individual self-definition, 'loos'd of limits and imaginary lines'.¹⁹ In another respect, Wurlitzer's 'austere themes of breakdown' carry echoes of Kerouac and *On The Road* (1957) where open country is 'a place of dazzling possibilities' but also, in the experience of Kerouac's Sal Paradise, a source of disintegration and 'the sensation of death kicking at [his] heels'.²⁰

Seed does not pursue the political implications of this spatial debate, or the degree for example to which it might explore the exceptionalist implications of America's foundational 'errand' or of Turner's notion of progress at a frontier untrammelled by inherited conditions. Rather, Seed argues, Wurlitzer combines a formalist interrogation of traditional narrative with a phenomenological interrogation of the individual's relationship to physical space in order to explore the 'perception of reality' itself: 'Wurlitzer's imagination has been haunted by spatial areas where cultural information drops away and where location is resolved to sheer space'.²¹ Thus *Nog* is predicated on 'a flight from the social and visual density of New York towards a West where all forms break down'; *Flats* blasts America's lush promise into a barren wasteland, 'and generalises it into a universal state of fragmentation'; and, in *Quake*, the coherent structures of Los Angeles are levelled to leave 'characters constantly looking down, into the depths of a crevasse or into a psychic abyss'.²²

¹⁷ Douglass Bolling, 'American Society in Rudolph Wurlitzer's *Quake*', *Critique*, 16 (1975), 70-80 (pp.75, 71).

¹⁸ Seed, pp.33,37.

¹⁹ Walt Whitman, 'Song of the Open Road', in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Signet Classics, 1955), pp.136-144 (p.138).

²⁰ Seed, pp.5,9. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.164.

²¹ Seed, pp.33,4.

²² Seed, pp.24,63,86.

Both Seed and Bolling see Wurlitzer ontologically reconfiguring the meaning of raw American space. Elsewhere Brian McHale would note, as part of his postmodernist poetics, that America's foundational frontier story was itself a form of ontological reconfiguration, transforming the West into a 'prototypical zone' where America's 'semiotics of space' could, in the work of its early writers, organize the country into 'two adjacent worlds, the world of "civilisation" and that of the "wilderness", separated by an ambiguous and liminal space, the "frontier"'.²³ But the implications of Kennedy's New Frontier politicisation of what was previously, for Hawthorne and Cooper for example, a 'borderland of the human mind' are pursued neither by McHale in general terms, nor Seed and Bolling in the specific terms of Wurlitzer, despite the latter commentator's references to a vague 'American dream'.²⁴

I will argue however that, in imagining variations on the American West that seem, on first inspection, to be the fantastic other worlds Fiedler had in mind for his mythical journeys, Wurlitzer creates zones of urgent, contemporary criticality. By stripping America back to its primal conditions – to ontological spaces where mid-century culture recedes into threatening landscapes that reimagine the uncharted wilderness as it was once penetrated by the country's early pioneers – Wurlitzer's novels re-explore and expose the raw conditions of that first encounter and interrogate the heroic myths that underscore contemporary New Frontier policy and political rhetoric.

3.2. Wurlitzer's Contested West

Kennedy's New Frontier fused geography with myth to create a symbolic space for the prosecution of political narratives. Wurlitzer too articulates a notion of American space as a site of ideological enactment. But while he embraces the spirit of Kennedy's exhortation, he contests its socio-political consequences.

In 1969, Wurlitzer spoke of a 'West Coast state of mind' where 'a lot of people are nomadic and living outside cultural definition'.²⁵ The reference is clearly to the 60s counterculture, but the terms infer a latter-day version of the foundational journey westward, where 'new world' definition was predicated on rejecting the constraints of the old: the East, Wurlitzer says, is 'historical, it's like it goes to Europe'. Wurlitzer's perception however is that the New Frontier has become a 'weird frontier' where America is somehow divided between

²³ McHale, p.49

²⁴ Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1958), p.19.

²⁵ Interview quoted in Seed, p.158.

those who adhere to traditional narratives and those out west for whom ‘forms have disintegrated [who] don’t have to be historically located [who have] become freer from your conditioning’. There is an intimation of crisis here, of an end-of-decade breakdown within a national narrative that can mean two contradictory things simultaneously. There is a sense, on the one hand, that the frontier is still seeking to advance its ‘empire of Liberty’, as Hodgson describes it, that American innovators are still building ‘a far, far better thing than what the Europeans were up to’.²⁶ On the other hand, Wurlitzer identifies the irony whereby the narrative of liberty infers the liberty to reject the narrative altogether, to be unbound from its assumptions. And Wurlitzer’s novels, and films, are largely driven by a complicitous critique which embraces that foundational frontier narrative, while simultaneously registering its instabilities and denials.

Consider Wurlitzer’s screenplay for the 1973 western *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid*, one of a series of Sam Peckinpah movies which destabilised the myth of the noble cowboy and contested the notion of the frontier as a site of civilised national self-assertion. In *The Wild Bunch* (1969) for example the U.S. - Mexico border zone becomes a proxy for America in Vietnam, its ageing gang of violent outlaws a dark counterpoint to Kennedy’s shiny Green Berets. And in *Pat Garrett*, Wurlitzer dismantles the very notion that America’s sublime space is, in and of itself and as popular culture and tradition had perceived it, an inspirational and enduring invitation to civilised advance.

Wurlitzer’s script adapts the story of Sheriff Pat Garrett’s pursuit and shooting of his erstwhile friend, now outlaw, William Bonney during the Lincoln County Cattle War in New Mexico in 1878. Thanks in part to Garrett’s own ghost-written account, the story had entered popular mythology as a tale of the heroic gunfighter, reproduced in movies like *The Kid from Texas* (1950) starring war hero Audie Murphy and, more recently, *Chisum* (1970) starring John Wayne. In the Wayne version, the story is subsumed into a narrative of benign national determination where order prevails, Garrett gets the girl, and where the frontier is ripe for economic progress: ‘things usually change for the better’ says Wayne as the rancher John Chisum.²⁷ The film’s opening and closing images are of Wayne on horseback presiding over a rolling-hilled Eden accompanied by a Merle Haggard soundtrack, ‘you gotta gamble on the new horizon for the dream and prize on your mind’.²⁸

²⁶ Hodgson, *Myth of American Exceptionalism*, p.61.

²⁷ *Chisum*, dir. By Andrew V. McLaglen (Warner Bros., 1970). TC 00:05:22.

²⁸ *Chisum*, TC 00:01:50.

In the Wurlitzer/Peckinpah version, released as the U.S. finally withdrew from Vietnam, the light of *Chisum*'s 'no place on God's earth more beautiful' is supplanted by a gathering darkness.²⁹ The film's casual violence is framed by a sombre sense of promise and possibility lost, and contained inside a landscape shrouded in shadows.

In one of the film's most resonant scenes, Sheriff Cullen Baker (Slim Pickens) is shot after joining Garrett to track down Billy's gang. He dies in a deep-focus wide shot of gathering twilight as Bob Dylan sings *Knock, Knock, Knocking on Heaven's Door*: 'it's getting' dark, too dark to see'.³⁰ The scene's pronounced sense of elegy, blending as it does allusions to a superannuated history of the cowboy movie with images of a moribund West, foregrounds multiple references to loss in Wurlitzer's dialogue. Black Harris, who shoots Cullen, speaks of a time when he and Garrett rode the range together, 'us old boys oughtn't to be doing this to each other, Pat. They ain't that many of us left'.³¹ Elsewhere, Billy will complain that his former friend has been compromised by a West that is no longer free and open: 'he's store-bought now [...] Done signed himself over to Chisum and every goddam landowner that's puttin' muscle on this country'.³² And in a meeting with a territorial governor who has hired him to catch Billy, Garrett is reminded, 'you people are obsolete, Sheriff [...] you and the Kid have only a few plays left'; a businessman adds, 'it's called civilisation, Sheriff. You might get used to it'.³³ Wurlitzer's script resonates to the sense that 'civilisation' means compromise on the western promise of freedom, and that the frontier myth is being corroded by the advance of business and politics. Pat and Billy are forced into effectively destroying each other because they are 'men who have outlived their time and are grappling with the new realities in which they find themselves'.³⁴

At the same time however as the film projects the darkness of possibility lost, Wurlitzer also conveys a sense of *primal* darkness in his 'vast and silent' landscape.³⁵ In a scene strangely detached from the core narrative, a solitary Pat exchanges fire with a nameless 'red-bearded man' sailing past on a raft.³⁶ It is a near hallucinatory episode in which both men emotionlessly target first a bottle in the water, and then each other, before deliberately firing

²⁹ *Chisum*, TC 00:21:01.

³⁰ *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid (Special Edition)*, dir. by Sam Peckinpah (MGM, 2005). TC 00:51:51.

³¹ Rudolph Wurlitzer, *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid, Signet Film Series* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1973), p.35. Hereafter *Screenplay*.

³² Wurlitzer, *Screenplay*, p.4.

³³ Wurlitzer, *Screenplay*, p.47.

³⁴ R. Philip Low, *Westerns in a Changing America: 1955-2000* (London: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2004), p.104.

³⁵ Wurlitzer, *Screenplay*, p.12.

³⁶ Wurlitzer, *Screenplay*, pp.86-9.

two near-miss warning shots. On screen, the scene plays out in silence and semi-darkness. It suggests a primal wilderness encounter where both men are caught precariously between the tentative communication of advancing social order and the residual suspicion emanating from a climate of unseen threats. What follows is an empty choreography in which both men describe the frontier between them – ‘the man [...] takes aim at Garrett. Garrett doesn’t move’ – and where new world optimism gives way to a sombre sense of separation and inertia, the ‘man and Garrett watch each other as the raft floats around a bend [the man’s family] stare at the riverbank with the same frozen, mournful expression’.

This shadow gunplay reflects the empty territorial manoeuvrings in *Flats*. The film’s sense that civilisation might ironically bring darkness reflects the savagery beneath the gloss in *Quake*. And indeed a sense of the lingering *presence* of the movie western becomes in itself a site of reference in Wurlitzer’s contestation of national mythology. Here, his first novel, *Nog*, deliberately subverts the gang-on-the-run western as part of its (re-)examination of an errand into the wilderness beyond the New Frontier.

3.3. *Nog*.

Nog invokes and contests multiple interlocking conceptions of the West. Its lacunary action moves through the liminal space of the contemporary Union, from the Pacific coast to the Sonoran Desert, from San Francisco to L.A. Its key events unfold against a movie backdrop that recalls John Ford’s Monument Valley. Its protean characters enact roles from Wild West popular culture, adopting and discarding Stetsons and chaps, staging gunfights in ghost towns, imagining shoot-outs: ‘I have to keep up a steady line of fire’ the unnamed narrator says at one point, ‘the way they managed to drop buffalo and Indians from train windows’ (*Nog* 112). It is by exploring these different *renderings* of the West in the geography of an *actual* west that the novel inscribes a journey to re-discover America: the characters talk of ‘searching for a new place, a place to rest up, a place to wait for a beginning or an end’ (*Nog* 47). In this the myths and assumptions that combined to construct America’s image of itself at the Old Frontier are tested for their relevance and legitimacy in the contemporary projection of the New.³⁷

³⁷ Cawelti, describes an emerging tendency during the 50s and 60s to reposition the Western as a site of nostalgic loss, and cultural disillusion: Berger’s *Little Big Man* (1964) and McMurtry’s *Leaving Cheyenne* (1963) are example novels, alongside Peckinpah’s films. John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1984), pp.107,126.

Central to *Nog*'s analytical procedures is a form of temporal transposition where Wurlitzer's rootless characters become latter-day pioneers. Their countercultural lifestyle, and contingent journey, stand in for the first settlers' departure from inherited systems. And it is in the tension between the characters' perceived freedom-of-movement, and the narratives they nonetheless either encounter or slip into as they traverse the western landscape, that the novel explores and problematises the contemporary invocation of a mythical inheritance. *Nog*'s elliptical construction delivers a series of critical encounters with different versions of the West, pronouncing on their stability for charting and energising a late-60s present.

The novel is suffused with unpredictability. The narrator self-consciously resists any form of definition, 'I no longer try and put anything together [...] nor do I try as much to invent a suitable character who can handle the fragments' (*Nog* 14). He has 'no history, therefore no bondage', lives in the immediacy of the moment ('Do nothing, want nothing, if you feel like walking, walk; sleeping, sleep') and manufactures memories to order, 'no memories; if they start to intrude, invent them [...] if pressed I might improvise on one of my memories' (*Nog* 18,17). The novel's outlaw-meets-road-movie action is similarly contingent. The nameless narrator, who may once have lived in New York, appears on a Pacific beach and drifts into an Independence Day party before drifting to San Francisco where he meets Meredith, a seductive shoplifter, and her partner Lockett in a Bay-side rooming house. The three hit the road, steal a doctor's bag from a hospital, and make camp at a desert ghost-town where Lockett is killed in a gunfight. The narrator and Meredith then race to Los Angeles where they board a boat en route through the Panama Canal. The novel ends with the narrator casually making 'no decision except that I'm moving on' and flying perfunctorily (back?) to New York (*Nog* 141).

What might motivate these events is never clear. The narrator's arrival in the West is self-consciously absurd: from someone called Nog he has acquired a fairground rubber octopus in a makeshift bathysphere which he has toured from Oregon to Utah and beyond. It is now abandoned on the beach. The doctor's bag contains morphine but its principal role, like a 'MacGuffin' in a Hitchcock story, is to propel the would-be gangsters onto the open road. The narrator challenges the reader to abandon cause-and-effect: 'I want to forget more than I remember [...] I must not remember places. I have no need for beaches, parks, luncheonettes, cities, rooms, corners, attics, streets and rivers now that I am in a place' (*Nog* 31,33). Indeed, this combination of elusively motile narrator and ill-defined plot prompted one critic to

describe *Nog* as a 'non-novel about a non-hero who goes through a number of non-experiences, arriving at a non-conclusion'.³⁸

There is however, amid the novel's ellipses, a postmodernist yearning for some sort of narrative order in the face of its persistent random encounters. Arriving in San Francisco, for example, the narrator talks of 'need[-ing] a direction, the hint of some discernible habit, a movement of some kind' and he laments the loss of a suitcase 'with the stickers and dents on it [that] was a record, a map I could retrace and run my fingers over whenever I wanted to' (*Nog* 27,30). Wandering through the Haight-Ashbury rooming house there is a metafictional moment where the narrator fuses his own sense of aimlessness with the apparent randomness of the text, and senses 'there are times when the voice of the narrator or the presence of the narrator should almost sing out' (*Nog* 36).

The novel's critique of the idea of the West inserts itself into this ontological zone between contingency and structure; between the latter-day pioneer's embrace of unpredictable possibility and the need to make sense of encounter; between the open promise of the New Frontier, and a nagging recoil from the sublime wildness of American space.

Consider one salient early passage where a characteristic swirl of elusive language simultaneously proposes a series of allusive connections. The narrator is talking of the memories he *invents*, the stories he *tells*, to sustain his resistance to precise definition: 'three [memories] is sufficient. I use only three. New York, for adventure, beaches for relaxation, the octopus and Nog for speculation' (*Nog* 17). Here a sense of contemporary freedom-of-manoeuve fuses with an allusive sense of narrative (mythical) trajectory. Thus, on the one hand, 'adventure' and 'speculation' suggest an embrace of contingency and the open road, where formal purpose surrenders to insouciance, 'relaxation' west-coast-style on a beach. On the other hand, New York and even Nog and his octopus are already charged with meaning. New York is the 'old' East, the historical point-of-departure for America's determined adventure westward, and the springboard for the narrator's own latter-day engagement with the country's furthest reaches. And the titular Nog has already been introduced as some sort of self-sufficient wilderness pioneer, part shaman, part medicine man. 'He was one of those semi-religious lunatics you see wandering around the Sierras'; he has 'a yellow light [...] streaming out of his chest' like some of bizarre beacon; he has been 'travelling [his octopus] to all the state and country fairs through the West and Midwest, charging kids a dime and adults a quarter' (*Nog* 12-13). The passage inscribes a continuous tension between narrative breakdown and a recourse to narrative structures; escaping New York for the freedoms of the

³⁸ Granville Hicks, 'Literary Horizons', *Saturday Review*, 52 (1969), p.54 quoted in Seed, p.29.

West nonetheless inserts the narrator into a mythical trajectory; free speculation revolves around a figure whose changing manifestations ultimately coalesce around his ability to navigate the American fringes. The narrator's fictional memories, in short, cannot escape their cultural underpinnings even as they attempt an unencumbered embrace of new experience.

And this tension, in turn, infers the novel's political critique. Here is Kennedy's new western adventure irresistibly implicated in a story of the past, critically compromised by that story's darker aspects. In the character of Nog, the portmanteau western adventurer who ends the novel down-and-out and drowned in New York's Central Park, the novel finds a motif for a story, across time, of pioneering hope that culminates in loss and disappointment. In another character, the disillusioned war veteran R.W. Bench, whose frontier rhetoric 'I know what it took to hold and discover this country' is a precursor to bitterness and gunplay, there is a reminder that America's western story is as much one of violence as it is of mystical destiny (*Nog* 91). And that is to say nothing of the degree to which Bench recalls Nixon's 'silent majority', those Americans politically frustrated by a 60s they saw as chaotic.

This analysis will divide its examination of historical and mythological contestation into three core components. First, allegory: the framework inside which the novel's discrete events become symbolic incidents in a re-mapping of America. Second, the novel's multiple conceptions of the West and the Frontier: its ontological sites where inherited cultural forms are exposed to contemporary question. And third, the role of Nog: his protean presence as a correlative for, and a guide to, the narrator's developing experience of America and its mythical drivers.

3.3.1. A New Map of America.

Nog's allegorical dimension is intimated from the start. The action begins on Independence Day, 4 July, on a California beach. Time and geography combine to position the reader on the edge of national space and national history: we are, in the self-same moment, invited to ponder America's declaration of national principles at the continental frontier of its narrative of Manifest Destiny, 'a new edge of the land' (*Nog* 47). The narrator too is poised to infer questions of national meaning from the terms of his own immediate situation. He has, it appears, escaped the perceived constraints of the East Coast where he 'lived precariously in the centre of brutal combinations of energy' and where 'I closed in on myself' (*Nog* 14-15). Now, walking the ocean's edge on Independence Day, he appears to have shrugged off a

personal past, a history and a set of cultural conditions determined three thousand miles away:

Slipping out from New York, everything going too fast. Left and wandered out to Coast. Met Nog and bought octopus. Travelled to country and state fairs, developing wonderful aversion to people and trips in general but at the same time a growing obsession with octopus [...] Was afraid to let go, surrender it, walk away. Settled down here just to sit, wanting nothing at all. Wait it out. (*Nog* 20)

There is a sense of an impending journey; the restless intensity of Wurlitzer's prose conjoins reader and narrator into a precarious poise. At the western frontier, on a date where America is supposed to self-evaluate, and with one version of America deliberately abandoned, *Nog's* opening conveys potential energy, drift and circling prior to redefinition. The narrator announces he has been 'wrenched out of two months of calm' (*Nog* 11). He talks of having to 'pull out', 'move on', of 'never get[-ting] a chance to rest' (*Nog* 12,14). Independence Day meanwhile is celebrated amid a storm which, according to an eccentric Colonel who protects the beach frontier, threatens to 'flood the whole town before anyone shifts ass to do anything about it' (*Nog* 18). Next day, both the narrator and the space appear to have been re-born: 'the day is lighter than the day before [...] there was a quickness, certainly, a sudden delirium, as if I were about to be sure of something' (*Nog* 26). As the novel's journey begins there is a sense of a muted, but pivotal moment from which both the self and American space will be irresistibly explored afresh: 'I must be moving on. I turned my back to the sea. I stood facing the road [...] and my foot, as if by itself, took a step and I was moving on, up the beach, past the sea wall, to the edge of the road' (*Nog* 26).

Nog's allegorical framework is suggested by its opening images of re-birth and errands of renewal starting at sites and dates of national significance. And this sense of redefinition continues through a text which privileges discovery, the Whitmanesque encounter, on the one hand, and yet has recourse to a language of mapping – of pulling its discoveries into meaningful shape – on the other. '*Was that what I was trying to do*' the narrator asks towards the end, '*to inhabit the land?*' (*Nog* 117).

Thus the narrator not so much heads to San Francisco as stumbles upon it, 'I suspect that I'm in San Francisco'; a supermarket visit becomes an immediate sensory experience of 'warm colours and the click of cash registers' rather than a plan, 'I had forgotten what I had gone in for'; each new location is a new possibility, 'I need a list of departures to keep suspended my own sense of arrival' (*Nog* 30,27,30). But this presentism, a sense one is

somehow seeing America for the first time, co-exists with a contrasting pressure towards bringing a newly experienced landscape under control.

At the 4 July party, the narrator tells the guests: 'I'm making a survey of the West Coast. Marine animals mostly [...] I am also making a survey of the Sierras and another, more general survey, on Los Angeles, Sacramento, Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, Oakland and Santa Barbara' (*Nog* 23). There is a spur-of-the-moment flippancy here of course but the statement's combination of elusiveness and purposefulness is echoed in references elsewhere to cartography or (metafictional) narrative design which suggest an uneasy equivocation between embracing American space, as if anew, and closing it down:

A story might set a course. It's these moments before moving on when stories come flooding in [...] It must be a way of calming myself, or not knowing what I'm doing. Stirring around does it, searching for a new place to rest up, a place to wait for a beginning and an end. (*Nog* 47)

Later, as the narrator follows the gunman Bench into the novel's desert ghost-town, he counts 'thirty-seven stars' in order to chart his way, 'anything will do, just to be sure, to know that it twists and bends [...] that it leads somewhere' (*Nog* 94-95).

There is, as Seed observes, a clear sense that the novel's narrator is trying to shape the spaces around him in and of themselves: 'Wurlitzer demonstrates an interest in the phenomenology of perception, specifically the perception of space'.³⁹ At the same time however each of the novel's locations resonates beyond its simple spatial dimensions, or in the Sonoran Desert its perceived lack of them. Each carries cultural associations which suggest America's long-running concern with the extent and sustainability of its national limits. A San Francisco commune, for example, represents as much a new frontier of American experience as a desert ghost-town invokes an experience from America's expansionist past.

So perceived, *Nog's* spatial explorations read also as allegorical explorations of what America's frontiers might be conceived to actually *mean*, both physically and imaginatively. As much as the opening infers foundational questions from its apparently incidental timing, Independence Day, and location, at the continent's edge, so the novel goes on to infer contemporary questions about where America is going from an on-the-road narrative whose eventual structure belies the apparent randomness of its picaresque. Bolling suggests that *Nog's* narrator is 'sucked into a final involvement with America' where America itself has become a 'threatening terrain [...] no longer capable of contributing a store of wisdom and

³⁹ Seed, p.39.

decency'.⁴⁰ But the novel's inscription of crisis is located as much in the topical and political urgency of its central encounters as it is in a broader sense of cultural breakdown.

3.3.2. Western Encounters.

Drifting into Haight-Ashbury, *Nog*'s narrator describes his 'errand' – such as it is – like this: 'I stumbled to the Pacific to be at a new edge of the land. I thought it would help with my breathing' (*Nog* 47). The language echoes Kennedy: 'new edge'- new frontier; 'breathing' - 'build a new world here in the West'.⁴¹ The site of the narrator's utterance however is a squalid rooming house where he sleeps in the corridor. It is one of a series of set-pieces where aspirations encounter their opposite; where the narrator's exploration of the 'new edge of the land' founders into disappointment, or worse. Each of these encounters explores the meaning of the Frontier for the contemporary American imagination, and each contributes to an overall sense of the West as a site of contestation where inherited narratives and unexamined assumptions jostle with topical circumstances or physical realities. A highly structured critique emerges from beneath the narrator's meanderings which moves from present to past, through encounters with the wilderness that are exhilarating and destructive by turns, and then on to an eventual subversion of foundational mythology itself.

On first presentation, the San Francisco boarding house would seem to offer, in the late 60s, the freedom from constraint that expansion westward promised in the early nineteenth century. Its halls – smelling of 'cat sperm', lit by candles, decorated with 'posters of rock-n-roll groups and children's drawings' – echo to the sound of an autoharp playing patriotic hymns, 'Stars and Stripes Forever' and 'My Country, 'Tis of thee', as if to suggest that a Haight-Ashbury lifestyle might simply be the latest expression of a nation-defining errand (*Nog* 31,48,50). Its occupants, women in 'simple dresses and no make-up', men in 'blue jeans and faded work shirts', adopt the uniforms of the frontier (*Nog* 32). Indeed, the house is almost a parody, certainly a heightened version of, West Coast hippiedom: Lockett projects art films of Meredith with self-conscious commentaries, 'Make a high sound and then a low sound. Bump against your clothes. Scream'; Meredith offers free love to Lockett, to the narrator and to both together (*Nog* 42). But any sense that this countercultural commune represents a new frontier of American *experience* is rapidly destabilised, both for the narrator who wonders whether he has arrived at 'the end [after] first having crossed the country,

⁴⁰ Bolling, 'Nog and Flats', pp.5,7,8.

⁴¹ John. F. Kennedy, 15 July 1960.

wandering around for a year, two years perhaps longer' and indeed by Wurlitzer's own assault on inherited cultural forms (*Nog* 32).

Exploring the space from his mattress, the narrator finds it claustrophobic rather than liberating: he is 'unable to creep out and establish some new space'; projecting from inside the building down 'a dark path through the Douglas fir in Oregon [that] led to a blacktopped road in Utah, to a winding alley in New York' returns him to a 'dim light at the end of long tunnels' and to the 'mattress [...] like a wrecked ship. It can't carry me' (*Nog* 46-7). In a sequence that owes more to extended metaphor than narrative logic, the narrator ends up in a 'food bin', a 'dark wet hole where everything finds its way sooner or later', contemplating less the airy opportunities of the house's freeform lifestyle, than its dark road-to-nowhere: 'we could all be in a boxcar. A boxcar hurtling across the Southwest toward a concentration camp ...' (*Nog* 57,54)⁴².

There is no rationale for the narrator's increasing discomfort inside the commune. The sparse present-tense prose displaces cause-and-effect in favour of a lacunary subjectivity, 'I'm studying the cracks in another floor. I have been studying them far too long. It is an abomination to keep travelling. It rots the mind. And yet what if I am going somewhere, arriving at something?' (*Nog* 51). There is a sense however that the narrator's ostensive project – to 'inhabit the land', 'to be at a new edge of the land', to go 'somewhere' – involves a contingent process of testing-out each new stop along the road, of restlessly engaging with, in JFK's terms, 'opportunities and perils [...] hopes and threats', of ultimately probing the opportunities afforded by America *now*, in a dispensation of putative *new frontiers*, as pioneers once probed the frontier in America's foundational past. The point is underlined in the narrator's next salient encounter.

On the road with Lockett and Meredith, the narrator savours being 'at the edge of the wilderness', bracing himself for the American interior: 'I need the run, my arms pumping, my nostrils flaring, my tongue hanging out, my heart pounding, my eyes rolling up at the hideous clouds' (*Nog* 61). The language here, the human blending with the equine, suggests the image of a cowboy and, consequently, a simultaneous movement into open space and into a popular cultural past. This trajectory continues as the trio stage a latter-day bandit raid on a hospital (*Nog* 62-66). In a side ward, decorated only by a white Stetson, the narrator finds a dying old man whom he imaginatively reconfigures as a superannuated cowboy pioneer: 'This old man', the narrator tells a nurse, 'walked across the Sierras and mapped most of the Northwest [...]

⁴² A reference perhaps to the FBI's COINTEL programme and the conspiracy theory that J. Edgar Hoover had camps prepared for domestic radicals.

had a broken leg in the Sweet Alice Hills [...] half dead he was washed away by a flash-flood, his deer-hide shirt torn off his back, his six-shooter lost forever'. Critically, the narrator fuses the old man's imagined story with his own, 'made himself a rubber octopus and travelled through the West [...] carved his own space with his own hands': they are pioneers together, old frontier and new, both linked and separated by time.

In his analysis, Seed singles out this episode as illustrating a general critique of inherited narratives: the narrator's bedside projection foregrounds the 'consciously fictive [...] pattern of the Western and similarly its references to the mythic figure of the pioneer'.⁴³ This view rightly underlines Wurlitzer's stated interest in an experience of American space devoid of constructs. But it underplays perhaps the degree to which the novel explores *particular* constructs as privileged drivers in contemporary politics. To that extent the narrator's adoption of the old man's imagined history – he will steal and wear the Stetson for the rest of the novel – is provocatively resonant. It proposes narrative shape, a map, to a consciousness which has had cause to lament, as well as embrace, its own lack of trajectory. It propels the narrator into an encounter with a West before 'there [was] nowhere else to go', before history had closed off its opportunities. And, to the degree that it proposes mythic structure and primal encounter simultaneously, it initiates an examination of the self-conscious return to perceived foundational principles that echoes through the period's political rhetoric. In short, the episode heralds an encounter with an American West whose myths and opportunities are both *in play* in the strategies and symbolism of 60s politics.

Nog's key episode, certainly its most ideologically charged, takes place around a ghost-town-cum-countercultural-settlement in the Agua Dulce Mountains in the Sonoran Desert of Southern Arizona. The location is highly suggestive: a sparsely populated wilderness frontier zone, close to the Mexican border. It reverberates to frontier mythology: the town is all that remains of the gold and silver mines that attracted settlement after the border wars of the mid-nineteenth century. And in the novel's diegetic mid-60s, it is the site of a new frontier where traces of the past have fused with a reconfigured territorial vision of the future. Meredith and Lockett for example have turned the empty buildings into a new settlement, 'we haven't been goofing. We built a stone reservoir and planted a crop'; one of the new inhabitants talks of 'getting into a beautiful organic thing' (*Nog* 101,81). To the extent, meanwhile, that the settlement is clearly countercultural, it also represents an attempt to symbolically redress the dark excesses of America's frontier history. The tepees 'in back of the town, halfway up the mountain' suggest a cultural accommodation with the native Americans

⁴³ Seed, p.37.

whom Turner (amongst others) saw as the first victims of national ambition.⁴⁴ The site of the novel's most dramatic action – an armed assault, a movie-style shoot-out on main street – is thus always and already contested, the West less as a space where cultural forms can be displaced and more a zone riven by national debates. It memorialises historical disputes over territory and the meaning of American civilisation; it refracts generational disputes over the exercise of America's freedoms.

The arrival at the location is similarly highly charged and culturally allusive. Like Cooper's Natty Bumppo and the Munro sisters at the advancing frontier of the eighteenth century, the narrator, Meredith and Lockett escape to their modern frontier via an exhilarating, cleansing and death-defying river journey through the wilderness, 'a roar envelops us. We are swept backward over a series of jagged rapids. White water surrounds us' (*Nog* 73). Like a lone cowboy (or like James Coburn in *Pat Garrett's* river scene), the narrator makes camp outside the town, but imagines himself deep in unexplored territory, 'I have lost the knack of recognizing a trail [...] There is no noise in the whole blown and eroded valley' (*Nog* 76). Like an Emersonian 'American Adam', he strips off to expose himself to his new landscape.

In an ontological space therefore which is already pulsing with associations – cultural and historical, from the movies and contemporary politics – the sudden arrival ('a bullet struck the rocks, the ricochet screaming') of the hunter-cum-gunman-cum-vigilante R. W. Bench attracts particular attention, not least because his actions focus, or perhaps *appropriate*, the swirl of western ideas around him (*Nog* 83). Bench's precisely described clarity of purpose and sense of historical conviction contrast sharply with the circular meanderings and volatile memories of the narrator: 'I know about the wilderness' Bench announces, 'I know what it took to discover and hold this country [...] A man's got to have claims. If he doesn't defend his claims he's hardly a man' (*Nog* 91). More particularly, Bench's insertion of contemporary social circumstances into a notably determined version of Manifest Destiny – 'claims', 'hold' – exposes a dark susceptibility in a political return to a frontier mythology which is otherwise predicated on visionary optimism.

Bench is, quite simply, a bitter man: a veteran of the defence of Bataan in the Philippines and of the battle of Iwo Jima with its flag-raising, two of America's costliest operations of World War Two. Today, aged 50, he still reminisces about American power, 'they [...] could parachute me in to any trouble spot anywhere' (*Nog* 90). The reference to the

⁴⁴ See, for example, Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier*, pp.12-13: 'Long before the pioneer farmer appeared on the scene, primitive Indian life had passed way. The farmers met Indians armed with guns'.

developing stalemate in Vietnam is clear. He is committed to the myth of success: his son is 'going to get scholarships and a pro [football] contract', despite the fact the 'boy is feeble' (*Nog* 87). But Bench himself is 'afraid to sleep. Always have been afraid to sleep'.

It is hard to ignore the extent to which Bench suggests 'the silent majority' to whom Nixon appealed in the '68 election; the blue-collar and lower middle-class suburbanites who were tired of the war in Asia but reluctant to jettison American power and reputation; who worried about social change and urban unrest. With an injured ankle – he is both literally and metaphorically a wounded animal – he draws the narrator towards surveying Meredith and Lockett's ghost-town as the site of a lost America, overrun by a putatively hostile 'other'. It projects on the one hand a nostalgic, cinematic image of frontier: Bench remembers playing there as a child, 'I was sheriff, mayor, bartender and outlaw. Best days of my life' (*Nog* 86). On the other hand, Bench sees the town as a battlefield for a latter-day return to the first principles of westward expansion, in which Lockett and Meredith are now the so-called savages. 'You never would believe what they had on. All kinds of weird costumes' Bench threatens, 'This one guy was the leader [...] My daddy seen him he would have shot him right there. No questions. They're up to no good' (*Nog* 88).

The subsequent action, a burst of kinetic energy which displaces the languid prose elsewhere into a suddenly cinematic cause-and-effect, sees Bench mounting a one-man assault on the town in which Lockett is killed. And again the associations are politically resonant, not least in the collision – or perhaps collusion – between 'silent majority' and frontier mythology in the year 1968. Wurlitzer goes out of his way to highlight some newly painted signage, 'ANNA WRIGGLESWORTH CLASS OF 1968', which links the town's history with its present significance (*Nog* 98). Bench's attack itself recalls a street-fight from a Western. Indeed, as Seed notes, the town's close-up description blurs the lines between historical memorial and newly minted movie-set, 'the paint sticks to [the narrator's] back', the saloon mirror has been 'painted black, perhaps to extinguish any reflection' (*Nog* 99). The action meanwhile unfolds like a series of film frames: 'the rifle circles the room and stops at Lockett'; 'the rifle has disappeared'; 'the rifle fired // Lockett's arms spread straight out from the gown. They stiffen and reach toward the ceiling before clutching at the hole in his stomach' (*Nog* 101). The transaction however is more complex than the simple degree to which the pivotal event in *Nog* recalls *High Noon* (1952).

First, and to the extent that Bench might see himself as a latter-day Will Kane / Gary Cooper, the incident exposes the degree to which the Western movie myth of advancing order involved exercising an inevitable but acceptable violence. There is no moral context for

Lockett's death, only the aw-shucks language of another-one-bites-the-dust, 'Bench did in Lockett', 'Come and get it, boy' (*Nog* 102-3). Second, and to the extent that the 60s revival of Western mythology contained, in part, a denial of its popular cultural ambiguities, the incident resonates into a critique of the entire New Frontier project. Bench launches his attack with a resonant battle-cry: 'This piece of country and that town is ours', fusing a contemporary assumption of 'silent majority' legitimacy with a foundational assumption of Manifest Destiny into a language which itself fuses cowboy with soldier, 'Hut, hut, hut' (*Nog* 92). Bench assigns himself thereby the exceptionalist self-belief that persuaded America to confront ideological enemies abroad, in Vietnam, and perceived social enemies at home: by 1968, over a hundred people had died in riots in Watts, Detroit and Newark. And third, the incident highlights an ultimately absurd auto-destructiveness in a project predicated on mythologised notions of progress. The last image we see of the ghost-town, as Bench disappears into the night, is of the tepees burning. Bến Tre, Vietcong as Indians, surfaces yet again: 'It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it'.

Those are perhaps political points enough. The entire episode could be read simply as a satirical attack on an unreconstructed and aggressive American conservatism. But to the extent the narrator drifts along with Bench's project ('We huddled together, Bench put his hand on top of mine and I put my other hand on top of his'), Wurlitzer invokes a set of national questions even deeper than those inferred by Bench's exceptionalist assertions (*Nog* 93). The narrator, adrift in history, is already ambivalent as he follows Bench into the valley, oscillating between the immediacy of the next encounter and a latent desire for trajectory:

I've spent most of my time in an endless search to find light and get away from light. If I could only be sure of that, that nothing happened. It would summon something, a continuity perhaps, a shout anyway; no, I don't have the energy to get carried away. I am being carried away. I need something steadier, an endless stare. (*Nog* 93)

The sense here that the narrator is looking, on his journey, for some sort of meaningful adjudication ('something steadier') between the space he encounters, America, and his own position within the mythologies that have historically energised that space is conveyed by the source of that scrutinising 'endless stare'. 'Nog', the narrator notes, 'is closer, his eyes cruel and distant' as if standing in judgement. And indeed the ambiguous, enigmatic and provocative figure of Nog, throughout the novel, further underlines the degree to which the shifting surface of Wurlitzer's text betrays a deep structural and allegorical engagement with what is at stake in the space of America's foundational self-image.

3.3.3. The Death of the Frontier Ideal.

In a restless, elliptical text, the eponymous Nog is the only consistent point-of-return. Consistent, but not entirely stable. It is unclear whether the narrator actually met him and his octopus on the way to the coast, or whether he is some form of motile alter-ego: Nog is, after all, 'for speculation'. Certainly, Nog's presence seems to dog the narrator's tracks, 'I'm stuck with Nog', and indeed the narrator may actually *be* Nog ('Nog is the name' he tells the 4 July party guests), the blurring of the two underlining the text's persistent slipperiness: 'Nog is not quite clear enough' the narrator says at the novel's start, 'I have to invent more' (*Nog* 38,22,13).

And yet, for all his elusiveness, Nog also provides the text with a tentative structure and a critical trajectory. He embodies a series of popular western images – cowboy, rancher, Indian fighter, medicine man – and so imports the mythology of the Old Frontier into the interrogated dispensation of the New. The strange 'yellow light that had lately been streaming out of his chest from a spot the size of a half dollar' suggests some form of mystical beacon that guides the narrator through his latter-day errand (*Nog* 12). To that extent, Nog's fate in the novel – he retreats from the West and dies down-and-out in New York – suggests a gloomy judgement on the ultimate viability of the frontier project, and its contemporary revival. Indeed, the different personae Nog traverses represent a developing series of critical encounters with a latter-day narrative of the frontier as political idea.

The core image of Nog however – the one the narrator tries to sustain – is of rugged pioneering independence. In San Francisco, the narrator constructs a movie-frame memory of Nog that seems to blend cowboy with counterculture, past with present:

Nog appears, leaning against a cottonwood or redwood or pinon tree ... by a small stream in the foothills. He is dusty and half-dead, his horse, a pinto or appaloosa, drinks beside him. He wears chaps and a torn shirt made out of deer hide, his six shooter notched, ready to go ... no that's too far back. He turns on under the calligraphy of vapour trails fifteen thousand feet high [...] Oranges and Tillamook cheese are on the table, a fire in the wood stove, a woman's heavy thighs visible as she bends to feed the chickens [...] In the city he wears a clear red flannel shirt, brown corduroy pants, scuffed black boots. He stands on the corner not waiting or listening. (*Nog* 39)

There is a sense here of the frontier ideal, of Alan Ladd as the laconic *Shane* in his buckskin, an image of American integrity in a persistent mythology. Elsewhere, the narrator will talk of Nog knowing 'the Western Rivers. Down the Rogue and the Humptulips' and envision himself as, or following, Nog in 'travel[-ling] through the West, helping people out'

(*Nog* 80-81). The narrator's modern-day western journey is framed by an image from an idealised past that he has chosen to follow, emulate or absorb. The narrator 'can't see father than [the fact that] Nog is on a quest of obsessive walking and sleeping between dog-eaten blankets on splintered floors'; at the commune 'Nog was as comfortable inside as he was outside. [The narrator] might as well get on with him'; and both are conjoined when the narrator sees himself on 'the long solitary trek from the mountains to the sea, a clean yellow light streaming from [the narrator's] chest' (*Nog* 29,38,60).

But the narrator's image of Nog is not static. As the novel develops a gap opens up between an idealised popular cultural image, and a series of other images which insistently question the progressive optimism of the frontier. And here lies the novel's ultimate political judgement on its contemporary circumstances.

The first Nog the narrator meets, for example – the one whose 'yellow light' leads the narrator westwards – is a burnt-out confidence-man. 'His face was lean and hatchet-edged'; he has 'become disillusioned about travelling with the octopus' and cashing in on stories – 'octopus lore [...] the devil fish myth' – about an artificial fairground attraction (*Nog* 12-13). Here Nog is another form of western figure, the confidence man of Melville, the P.T. Barnum described by Lindberg. Nog is thus located in a broader, and more culturally ambivalent, idea of the West: the opportunities afforded by its historical opening-up also, we are reminded, included the opportunity to profiteer; the exhilarating promise of personal (and in the immediate political context *national*) redefinition also contains the freedom-of-manoeuve to deceive. Nog the guide is also, after all, 'a semi-religious lunatic [...] gulping down peyote in Nevada with the Indians' (*Nog* 12). New Frontier politics are destabilised by the inference that the Old Frontier was mapped as much by con-men as cowboys.

The most revealing Nog the narrator meets however is during the episode at the ghost-town. Here, in the disorientating wilderness, Nog is first the sure-footed pioneer on whom the narrator relies to survive: 'I must find water. I must manage a few memories, now that the sky is so huge [...] and to do that I need Nog ...' (*Nog* 76-83). Nog becomes the movie cowboy ('he stands on the other side of the fire, cleaning his harmonica'), the reliable ranch-hand ('he can help out with the stock'), the signal figure who 'rushes in now, to be where he is not' to make sense of an alien landscape where 'the night is too huge, there is too much space': 'he could stumble through twenty miles of desert and find water. He doesn't know what it is to hesitate'.

But as the ghost-town episode develops, as the narrator drifts along with Bench's assault, the image of Nog-the-noble-cowboy recedes. It is as if the notion of the idealised

frontier encounter is being held in judgement and found wanting by its eventual embrace of violence. Thus, as Bench rants:

Nog watches. He never lets up. He steps forward and then fades away like an Apache. He edges closer. Does he know he is cast loose? That he is abandoned? There is an anger in him, a rage that has caused him to smash the furniture in his cabin [...] He's packed up against the Pacific and has to look back, inside, into the land [...] he has to move on. He's sick and tired of the same stands of Douglas fir. (*Nog* 88)

And as the shooting starts, Nog's eyes are 'cruel and distant', he 'shrinks back', his capacity to operate as a mythical guide to this new invocation of the old frontier encounter supplanted: 'I know Nog is caught [...] that he is paralyzed with his foot in the stirrup, one leg over the horse's ass. I know he's reached the end of the woods, that the light has gone out of his chest' (*Nog* 93,97,95).

Whether Nog's perceived judgement on the ghost-town episode is one of nostalgia for a previous age, or alternatively a gloomy recognition of the shortcomings that may always have attended the myth of the frontier, the change from (ambivalent) wide-eyed opportunist, to territory-defining pioneer, to lost and forgotten cowboy evinces a critical destabilisation of the political assumption that the values of the Old Frontier can simply be re-applied to the New. It refuses to separate the rhetoric from its historical, as opposed to popular cultural, baggage of violence. To that extent the final incarnation of Nog both deepens the critical judgement and pronounces an ultimate repudiation.

The Nog who inhabits the text's last section has abandoned both the space and the perceived spirit of the West: 'Nog has passed quietly through Nevada. He's not wasting time. He has lost weight. He has raped two college girls in Colorado and Arkansas' (*Nog* 102-3). Here the sense of momentum that accompanied the notion of the New Frontier encounters its dark reverse: the movement is eastwards, back towards an old-world past, to a climate of desperate fear rather than expansive optimism, 'he crouches in the corner of a boxcar, holding a switchblade knife in front of him [...] he's forgotten where he is going, where he's come from' (*Nog* 105,). And ultimately the mythical experience of an open landscape with an ever-expanding frontier closes down into a latter-day experience of confinement and exhaustion: 'there is only a slit now for Nog. He hides in Central Park [...] Nog has been cancelled. He couldn't make it out of the park. He found no help and drowned himself in two feet of water' (*Nog* 131,141).

Towards the end of *Nog*, on the road into L.A., the narrator reflects on his journey, 'I think I tried to get back into the land. Was that what I was trying to do, to inhabit the land?'

(*Nog* 117). The question re-asserts the text's allegorical inflection as an account of a renewed call towards national purpose as much as it inflects an eventual lack of convenient resolution in the text's fragments and ellipses. And in the novel's final shrug, 'I flew to New York', there is a sense of suspensiveness where 'the land' – an America defined, and now politically *re*-defined, by its progress westwards – is no longer capable of sustaining either its gross mythical narrative or its promises of individual self-determination. There is a sense, quite simply, that the western *idea* has been re-mapped, re-explored, and compared with the mythical and popular cultural assumptions of contemporary political rhetoric – and found wanting.

It is notable that one of the narrator's final gestures towards Meredith is to ask a fairground tattooist to inscribe 'a map of the U.S. on her ass [...] but don't put any ink in the needle' (*Nog* 119). The gesture suggests an eventual erasure of an illusion of America itself. And it is notable too that the narrator's final image of the frontier sees:

Piles of rubble stretch away on both sides of the road [...] red lights on two radio towers blink on and off. I first talked with Nog in such a ravaged and raped landscape. It is a battlefield of bricks, oil cans, skeletons and rubble of shacks, rimless tires, piles of garbage, smashed iceboxes and smoked glass. (*Nog* 121)

The sense that American expansion has eventuated not in progress but in a return into some form of savage wilderness anticipates the cultural regression of *Quake*, and the benighted manoeuvrings in the detritus-strewn wasteland of *Flats*.

3.4. *Flats*.

Written early in the Nixon administration, *Flats* first presents as a stripped-back account of post-apocalyptic survival. Its indeterminate world is part bomb-site, part garbage dump: strewn with 'rubble, blown-up boulders or smashed statues' and 'plastic containers, broken bottles and rotting produce', mysteriously illuminated by 'two blue lights [moving] slowly in to the darkness' (*Flats*, 7,70,8). Its action, taking place it appears over one night, reduces to an obscure set of manoeuvrings: an indiscernible number of irresolvable figures and shifting identities – provocatively named after American cities, Memphis, Omaha, Cincinnati and more – inch around one another in a zero-sum game of territorial dominance.

There are echoes of Beckett, 'Vladimir and Estragon on a bad trip' said one critic, and the prose recalls the sparse slipperiness of *The Unnameable* (1953).⁴⁵ As such *Flats*' account of

⁴⁵ Arthur Curling, 'Review of *Flats*', *Library Journal*, 95 (1970), (p.38)

characters who 'do not remember the old ways, signed directions', who seek to chart their position in a blasted emptiness ('This space will be defined by twenty-five paces around, more or less') during a night to which daybreak brings only the gloomy prospect of relentless repetition rather a hope of progress ('I won't repeat myself. I have repeated myself'), appears to suggest a bleak future where history has been erased and where human culture has been reduced to random piles of detritus: 'a small pebble, a five dollar-bill, three pennies, a scrap of yellow paper and a handkerchief clotted with blood' (*Flats* 7,33,159,29).

Commentators have largely interpreted the novel's detritus-strewn mise-en-scene and hard-to-navigate prose as expressions of postmodern indeterminacy and cultural entropy. For Seed, the landscape's 'broken statues function as metonyms of the novel as a whole' where recognisable (narrative) forms fragment, and where human personalities themselves elude characterisation or differentiation.⁴⁶ Bolling meanwhile suggests that, like Beckett, Wurlitzer is inscribing an 'aesthetic of chaos', highlighting the 'falsity of man-made meaning projected on a reality which defies meaning in its absurdity and a-logicality'.⁴⁷ For both commentators, the novel's oblique references to an actual America are only vague memories deposited by a cultural endgame. Seed argues the blasted flatlands erase 'one of the most cherished tropes in American literature, the landscape as garden' and with it, one supposes, the narratives of progress and freedom that thrived in 'God's country'.⁴⁸ For Bolling, the city names the characters so provocatively adopt serve only to challenge assumptions of meaning contained in geographical preconceptions: 'the reader's America, his own city or one that he knows, his own "place" – all this is strangely transformed by the greyness and otherness of imminent death [...] he cannot put the pieces together and thus becomes disorientated'.⁴⁹

To suggest however – as Bolling does – that *Flats* uses an apocalyptic backdrop to foreground a general sense of American decline is to underplay the degree to which the novel's fragmentary texture is underpinned by trace references to a specific set of contemporary issues. Wurlitzer's depiction of a post-industrial desert may efface the notion of an American Eden, but it inserts in its place a latter-day invocation of a primal experience of American wilderness, uncharted and threatening, stripped of its romantic baggage and popular cultural optimism. An ontological site where the alien and 'the civilised' confront, manoeuvre and negotiate with one another in a 'politics of displacement' (*Flats* 29).

⁴⁶ Seed, pp.63. See also Dickstein, p.228.

⁴⁷ Bolling, 'Nog and Flats', pp.14,12.

⁴⁸ Seed, p.65

⁴⁹ Bolling, 'Nog and Flats', p.13.

In this analysis, *Flats* is interpreted as a layered series of palimpsests. First, the novel's canvas is stripped back to a diegetic space just beyond familiar American co-ordinates: a reimagined wilderness on the road, somewhere, from the novel's network of established cities. Second, that space is given a nominal cartographic form by narratives of popular culture inherited from the mythology of America's western past. And third, the novel's shifting figures attempt to navigate between the primal open space and the superimposed cultural co-ordinates in an aspiration towards progress, only to fall back into inertia. This choreography in turn captures a mood of adjacent political crisis where the re-assertion of the frontier narrative had, by 1970, collided with its contradictions. The stalemate in South East Asia, the collapse of America's popular and prosperous post-war consensus, the divisions that rendered sclerotic America's turn-of-the-decade political apparatus; all these are inflected in, what I will argue is, an expression of the *experience* of cultural crisis.

3.4.1. A New Wilderness.

Flats begins by submerging the reader in a crisis of *comprehension*: in glimpses of familiarity, and dramatic shape, which dissolve even as they are invoked. The number of figures is unclear and they appear, frustratingly, to switch identities arbitrarily. The narrative voice is Memphis one moment, then Omaha, and then Halifax before going through eight name changes. He introduces himself however with the phrases 'Call me Memphis' and then 'Call me Omaha', self-conscious references to the opening of *Moby Dick* which call attention to his ambivalent status, the precariousness of his narrative authority and the degree perhaps to which the reader is invited - or not - to read *Flats* with an American tradition of allegory in mind (*Flats* 8,13). A second character is called Flagstaff, a third is variously Abilene, Tacoma and Cincinnati. But any confidence that the text rotates around just three figures is constantly disrupted by the flow of voices, the shift from first to third person ('it has been decided to transfer to Omaha. Omaha was once an expansive and open town for me') and the difficulty of fixing their physical relation:

Omaha drew a line with the knife, towards the smashed statue. Then he joined the line to the line Memphis had created [...] I am confused about the usual paraphernalia of names and directions. I have to pretend that Omaha is moving on, toward the city, even though I might have come from there. Or is that Memphis? These are tight areas, to be sure, involved as they are with definitions. (*Flats* 13,18-19)

The sense that the novel occupies a zone of indeterminacy where discrete personalities are fractured at best, exposed as arbitrary constructs at worst ('I am not attached to Mobile [the narrator's final nominal identity], not to names, even my own. Names and places move around me as well as inside of me') is compounded by the vagueness of its location (*Flats* 152). We are in a wasteland of unknown size ('The area was full of wreckage, as if from a battle, and the horizon was hazed with chemical waste') and yet we are constantly invited to give it topographical form and geographical position, just as the novel's figures struggle to establish their own spatial relations: 'there's too much debris [says Flagstaff]. We need a map, some kind of control' (*Flats* 9,53).

That invitation-to-the-reader takes the form of a series of seductive, but ultimately unstable, cartographic clues. The narrator tells us he is called Memphis (temporarily) because 'Memphis is the last place I started from. Not that I haven't located myself in a host of places: Toledo, Denver, Tucumcari, El Paso' (*Flats* 8). This sequence suggests a journey into America's southwestern desert, an impression reinforced by Flagstaff who has arrived there 'by way of El Paso, Carizozo, Denver and New York' (*Flats* 16).

There is the suggestion here of a frontier, of a location which is just beyond the edge of formally charted space. Memphis has landed here because 'his grey Studebaker failed him a hundred miles back'; Houston (*formerly* Memphis) overhears voices talking about the presence, somewhere, of a road ('Boston, two forty ... two-lane blacktop [...] Out of St. Louis'); an arriving stranger (later Flagstaff) has memories from *back east*: 'Come from here. No, it was New York. Lucky to get out of New York' (*Flats* 9,126,13).⁵⁰

Another clue. Within the location itself, we are constantly drawn into a process of mapping, as if the situation's gross indeterminacy will resolve itself once physical relationships can be decided. Thus, in the opening encounter, a stand-off between Memphis/Omaha and the stranger/Flagstaff over who will control a campfire is expressed through spatial coordinates. First, the gridlines that mathematically describe their relative location:

Omaha scratched vaguely at the ground with his pen knife. In front of him and slightly to his left he could see the line Memphis had begun on first entering the clearing. The line was two feet long and ran parallel to the smashed statue. (*Flats* 14)

Then the gridlines are translated into the space of their verbal negotiation/confrontation:

⁵⁰ The language here anticipates the sparse, car-obsessed, conversation of the unnamed characters in Wurlitzer's screenplay for *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971).

Flagstaff spoke from the darkness:

"You built the fire."

"That's right. I built the fire and kept it going."

"You staked out this space. You came in and began to wait it out."

"I was here and I more or less got involved with staking out this space."

"It doesn't matter whether we're going anywhere together".

"We're not going anywhere together. You're sitting over there and I'm sitting over here". (*Flats* 27)

Flats' emphasis on space – and *shaping* space - is constant. And yet even as the disorientated reader is drawn towards fixing on where (and who) the figures might be, the system of co-ordination is immediately destabilised. The temptation to infer location from the list of cities, for example, is mocked by Flagstaff's memory of a:

Crater south of here [where] A toy train was used to run around what was left of us and mechanize the circle. The train would stop and whoever was nearest would announce the station: Chattanooga, Mendocino, Little Rock, Fall River, Las Vegas, Seattle, Minneapolis, New Orleans, El Paso, Sioux City. (*Flats* 47)

This is an impossible train route, back and forth, up-country and down. But even as the play of memory constructs a location whose haphazard points of reference defeat precise positioning, it nonetheless infers a location which is somehow bounded by America *as a whole*, a liminal circle of cities - north, south, east and west – that still resonates with 'what was left of us'. The effect is to suggest that the action's location is *nowhere* and *everywhere* simultaneously. The figures are lost in America and yet America, mediated through the random play of place names, is ever-present. Still further: the figures have a residual memory of an America which splinters even as it is invoked. This tension – where figures are simultaneously suspended within and without definable space – inflects the text's every manoeuvre. Thus when Halifax, Flagstaff and a third character Abilene ('who doesn't recall where he came from or where he's going') position themselves so their 'three bodies formed a triangle', they are unable to match their geometry to the points of the compass:

The oak tree is one boundary. The statue will be the other. East to west. Call it that. North will be the bushes. There are bushes over there where he's sitting. I'll be south. No, that's not right. I'm the middle between east and west. I'll be the halfway point. We'll have to make a south. (*Flats* 54,48,56)

So, layer one in *Flats*: a nowhere that is nonetheless *somewhere* in an America which seems to present familiar co-ordinates – roads, rail-lines, *cities* – but refuses to resolve into a recognisable map. We are in a space that is now blank, and awaiting definition, yet which

retains a sense of how it might have been defined before. The characters are negotiating the uncertainties of new lines of demarcation in a wilderness where old frontiers have been effaced, and yet retain their memory of a prior culture, and a prior cartography in the place names the ill-defined consciousnesses deploy to fix themselves. 'I came out of Tucson by way of Las Vegas' says one figure, 'and it used to be that route was straight ahead. I don't hardly recognize the route no more from the obstacles and turnabout spaces' (*Flats* 122-3).

3.4.2. Popular Cultural Cartography.

It is tempting to read *Flats* as an inscription of entropy: its figures' stumblings as terminal gestures in a world that is losing shape and energy. By the novel's end Houston finds that 'he is disintegrating faster than I thought' and determines that he 'can't lie still like this [...] I have to keep moving, even if it is a crawl' before slipping into the figure of Portland who, 'dried up [and] reduced to arrangements', waits for daybreak by ritualistically shaping the space, step by agonising step:

After each step he would open his fingers and mouth and shout out the number of his step. He was up to thirty-eight [...] I can handle thirty more steps. Then I'll have to make a corner. (*Flats* 127,135,143-5)

So perceived, Wurlitzer's figures are staggering through similar ground to Beckett's Winnie and Willie, committing themselves to activity-without-progress in a wasteland where life reduces to ritual: 'the only act left is to acknowledge that it's all over, that we're going back and forward, to keep from resting, to keep from sinking down and letting it come' (*Flats* 113).

But there is another reading. Here, *Flats* oscillates between delocalised, ahistorical abstraction on the one hand, and a *concrete* America, precariously present and offering glimpses of the topically familiar, on the other. The process of oscillation hangs between two conceptions of frontier and of space: one raw, pared down to fundamental questions of survival, the other refracted through history and configured by popular culture.

The first section of *Flats*, a campfire encounter, sees the newly arrived Memphis seeking dominance over a stranger (later Flagstaff). Their language is elliptical and laconic but also strangely familiar. As much as it conveys a wariness between figures who have become detached from convention ('Memphis [has] long ago and forever misplaced his repertoire of opening gestures'), it is also the language from a hundred Westerns where characters drift into one another in the wilderness. 'Which way you headed?'; 'I'm passing through'; 'Recollect I managed a fire once [...] must have been twenty bodies that moved in to appreciate that burn.

I didn't pay them no never mind' (*Flats* 12). The language recalls the scene in the *Pat Garrett* screenplay where Garrett, a 'vast space around him', first encounters John Poe, the government agent who will dog his pursuit of Billy:

A VOICE calls out of the night. It is soft but with an edge to it.

VOICE: Keep starin' at the fire.

[...]

There is a long moment of silence. Garrett holds his frozen position.

VOICE: State your name.

GARRETT: Pat Garrett.

[...]

VOICE: Come down from Santa Fe, ain't you?

GARRETT: Last week.

VOICE: Name is Poe. John W. Poe, out of Fort Griffin, Texas.⁵¹

The screenplay's emphasis on where people come from is a familiar Western trope. Another character in *Pat Garrett* is called Wichita; in 1970 *The Virginian*, loosely adapted from Owen Wister's novel, was a highly-rated TV programme. *Flats* ironically echoes this notion that location can deliver personal meaning. As the narrative voice shifts identity, so each new place name is endowed with a different characteristic, as if the character is seeking to project a legend that is tactically appropriate to each new encounter. Thus Omaha is 'an open and expansive town' when he begins negotiations with Flagstaff; Halifax holds 'no surprises [and] the weather is dull and unspectacular' when he is trying to deflect aggression and, when he leaves on a solitary trip to find water, he becomes 'Wichita [...] a flat and lonely place committed to the production of machines' (*Flats* 13,45,68).

This accumulation of trace references creates a palimpsest: the sense of a living America, elusive and oscillating, layered over a decaying wilderness. The cities – described in the glib language of a subversive guidebook ('There are no surprises in Duluth. It is a solid cornhusking place where questions are never asked') – fluctuate between the authorised and the illusory (*Flats* 100). Whether or not Wichita is 'flat and lonely', it is *indeed* a city committed to the production of machines as a former capital of the U.S. aviation industry; whether or not Halifax is 'dull', it is also historically one of America's first sites of European settlement; and there are indeed 'two Portlands. One on the East Coast and one on the West Coast' (*Flats* 68,134). These geographical references, seductively substantial and frustrating by turns, are further inflected by the language of the Western with its own references to the cultural idea of the frontier, itself a fusion of cartographic substance and foundational myth.

⁵¹ Wurlitzer, *Screenplay*, pp.55-56.

The combined effect is to continually remind the reader that *Flats*' abstract wilderness is also a space which touches a real American landscape, attached to both national history and mythology.

In this reading, what first presents as an account of post-apocalyptic decay also presents as a journey to – or just *beyond* – the edge of a distinctively *American* space. We are nowhere and yet in touch with *everywhere* in America at the same time. So perceived, this is the space of the frontier, the liminal zone between comforting structure – *civilisation* – and threatening emptiness; between a geographical somewhere ('You recall Boise?' says a voice towards the novel's end, 'Now that was a town. The road went directly into Boise as nice as you please') and a forbidding nowhere: 'these flats are likely to go for miles and miles and when we get out of them there's likely to be some more' (*Flats* 124).

The flatlands' indeterminacy is layered over with a patchwork of tentative cultural co-ordinates, constructed from the very material – the mythology of the Western, the expansion which turned advance settlements into the thriving cities – that defined the American experience at its first historical frontier. At one point, for example, a character called Duluth – named after one of the first pioneer settlements on the Great Lakes – turns into Houston, a city founded in the nineteenth century as an act of real estate speculation after Texas secured its independence from Mexico. And 'Houston is a changing and determined city [...] growth is inevitable. The port is full and goods move in and out without analysis. Houston will definitely expand' (*Flats* 115). Here again is the New Frontier ambition, a wilderness re-imagined, an encounter with the inherited cultural traditions and mythical priorities that transformed the raw condition of the American past. And it is in the ultimate capacity, and legitimacy, of those inherited cultural conditions to actually give shape and trajectory to the new wilderness, that the novel conveys its sense of the political moment, and of the political crisis, into which it inserts itself.

3.4.3. *Flats*' American Politics.

In February 1968, after the Tet Offensive, Walker Cronkite famously reported: 'to say that we mired in stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion'.⁵² By the time *Flats* was published, Vietnam, the foreign policy centrepiece of the New Frontier project, was mired in an inertia that was dogging the whole of U.S. political life. The 1968 election –

⁵² Walter Cronkite, *CBS Evening News* (27 February 1968) quoted in David Farber and Beth Bailey, *The Columbia Guide to America in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p.391.

Nixon vs Humphrey vs Wallace – driven by divisions over Vietnam and by a conservative backlash against social reform, had produced a barely functioning government. Nixon beat Humphrey by just 500,000 votes and Congress was oppositionally Democrat. The cost of fighting on two fronts – in South East Asia, and amongst the escalating protests at home – was draining an economy already struggling with rising prices and unemployment. The sense of a country that was losing its way – or, worse, *stagnating* – is reflected in *Flats* as its action plays out across the novel's wilderness with its palimpsest of cultural assumption.

The novel is built around three main 'movements'. The figures' manoeuvrings cluster around 1) a struggle between two new arrivals at the frontier space, Memphis/Omaha and Flagstaff; 2) a jockeying for position as Omaha/Halifax/Wichita looks for water and encounters Tacoma/Cincinnati and 3) a terminal movement where Wichita/Duluth/Portland tries to map out the space, step-by-step, while disembodied voices threaten its fragile, man-made borders. Each movement is underpinned by circuits of political and cultural reference which suggest the U.S. decline towards turn-of-the-decade political stasis.

In movement one, the two figures are like cowboys, alone on a frontier without rules, poised for a gunfight. They draw lines in the sand to stake out their territory ('I still have a few straight and curved lines before me, pointing nowhere in particular'); they tentatively engage in conversation without communication ('Read me some labels. As a favour', asks Flagstaff; Omaha responds with the ingredients on a 'Heinz Vegetarian Beans Tomato Sauce label' from his 'pile of objects'); their survival in the darkness depends on a shared fire (*Flats* 34,35). This wary stand-off unfolds against the threat of gunplay. Between the two figures is 'a silver pistol' and their manoeuvres rotate around their need to control it, or defend themselves against it:

Something has to happen. [...] If only Omaha could make the jump into what Flagstaff is thinking. For instance: Flagstaff eyed Omaha warily. He needs Omaha to fit into his plan. He moved a few inches closer to the fire, his hand reaching for the pistol. If he could control the space long enough for ... (*Flats* 27,31-32)

Later Omaha picks up the pistol and a knife and draws 'a line around them so that they were enclosed' as if to contain the potential of violence between them against the greater imperative of survival: 'We have to hold this space. You said we have to spread out from here. We have to establish who comes and goes' (*Flats* 40,45).

This first movement draws the reader into a circuit which joins a threatening wilderness with a mythologically American image of frontier where both are refracted through the unresolved narrative of figures who are at once indeterminate and yet simultaneously

determined by popular culture, Western gunfighters. The effect is to promote and to destabilise the notion of the frontier simultaneously; to indicate how the Western narrative becomes a default point of referral in the American confrontation with the 'other' but to indicate also that that same Western myth is deceitful, as much an issue of expedience as a foundational story about the advent of civilisation. From the perspective of 1970, *Flats* begins by stripping back the frontier encounter to its primal transaction: a blend of suspicion and enforced mutual reliance predicated on isolation. By exposing that encounter's roots in survival rather than grand ideology, it questions the pretensions of any political project predicated on taking the frontier and making it 'new'.

The point is developed in the novel's second movement. Here the cowboys become soldiers prosecuting a complex of military manoeuvres designed to annexe space for expansion. The movement begins with Wichita looking for water: he leaves the fire's 'circle of light' and heads into the darkness where 'he no longer knew where he was' (*Flats* 68). Out there is the unknown 'Cincinnati, whatever that is' and when the two – Wichita and Cincinnati – finally spot one another they are in a no man's land: 'is this a tollgate?' asks Wichita, 'Does this mark the end of the road?' (*Flats* 69,85). The language of their encounter is military. Wichita talks of 'moving out', later he will be 'pinned'; he adopts the calls of a drill instructor, 'Drop your cocks and grab your socks'; Cincinnati 'can feel the squeeze' as Wichita (who is now Duluth) circles around him (*Flats* 67,108,75,103).

Duluth's manoeuvres – through a field of ragweed with Cincinnati in an old armchair at its centre – are painstaking ('Duluth is tightly organised but he's taking his time'), narrated in agonising tactical detail ('He was particular about his direction and the placement of his hands and legs') but become, ultimately, a record of process without purpose: 'I had thought Wichita [now Duluth] was going to go straight out for water and then straight back. He forgot or overran himself and then became involved in tactics' (*Flats* 97,95,99). The episode is suggestive of Vietnam, of relentless military activity with little ostensive gain, of an operation which began with one national narrative (containing Communism) and defaulted to another: withdrawal with some semblance of dignity intact. In 1971 the leaked *Pentagon Papers* revealed that the policy of persisting with the war was 70% to do with avoiding national humiliation.⁵³ By the time *Flats* was published, NBC's Frank McGee was asking whether the

⁵³ *Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force in The National Archives* <<http://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers/>> [accessed 7 August 2012]

futile destruction of Bến Tre was indicative of the entire adventure: 'we must decide whether it is futile to destroy Vietnam in an effort to save it'.⁵⁴

This notion of project without purpose, of a zero-sum game, is emphasised by the symmetry of the language which bookends *Flats*' second movement. It begins with Cincinnati positioning himself at the centre of 'the slovenly wilderness':

Call me Cincinnati. I moved in a while ago. You might remember passing me on the way out. I want to get people arranged around the armchair. I can be the focus. It will help pass the time. (*Flats* 89)

The movement ends with Duluth sitting in the same armchair:

Call me Duluth. I just moved in. You might remember seeing me on the way in. I'm a steady and located man. You can fix on me. It will help pass the time. (*Flats* 110)

What is nominally a victory for Duluth (he is now at the centre of this ragweed field) is also a recursive event: the repeated language infers a cycle of repetition whose only value is that 'it will help pass the time'. More particularly, these near mirror-image phrases contain a paradoxical rhetoric where the language of victory and leadership ('You can fix on me'/'I can be the focus') is used to disguise stasis. This is the language of Michael Herr's Khe Sanh and of the American pyrrhic victory in the Tet Offensive. More widely it captures the inertia-inducing paradox of American public opinion. In mid '68, when U.S. military power was revealed to be at its least effective, Gallup reported that the majority of Americans still approved of the war.⁵⁵ When Nixon assumed power he sought to reconcile both pro and anti by pursuing 'peace with honour'. The process of withdrawal through 'Vietnamisation', however, was hampered by public pressure to deny the Communists any form of advantage. The war dragged on for another six years.

If *Flats*' first movement contests the progressive notion of the American frontier as a threshold political principle, then the second movement exposes that principle's contemporary real-world implications. In Vietnam, the U.S. was being brought to a standstill by the very New Frontier project that proposed the dynamic opposite. So perceived, the third movement of *Flats* suggests the next historical step in this allegorical critique of frontier: from first expansion, via failed expansion overseas to, now, uneasy retrenchment.

After his encounter with Cincinnati, Duluth shifts identity into Houston and finds himself exposed, out of position, looking for escape:

⁵⁴ Frank McGee, *Evening News*, NBC, March 1968, quoted in Farber and Bailey, p.301.

⁵⁵ George Gallup, *The Gallup Poll : Public Opinion, 1935-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), p.108.

I have to get back now, even though I have forgotten what there is to get back to. I can remember the slowness, the lack of variety. I need that. I need to return to a space I have left so that I can finally leave altogether. (*Flats* 115)

Guiding his journey back to whatever passes for safety in what is otherwise uncharted space ('he's not sure of the direction. There have been too many circles for that') are two contrasting forms of influence (*Flats* 116). In the first, he is surrounded by disembodied voices in the ragweed, a cacophony ('there are more than two voices but [he] can't tell them apart') offering suggestive, but contradictory, routes back to civilisation; 'if you swing right I'll swing to the left'; 'I found tracks over to the east a ways'; 'a man could see the buildings standing up there, every edge recognizable' (*Flats* 123,119,124). Houston ends up almost paralysed:

This patch of ragweed is bursting with bodies [...] There is only my own momentum and now I have lost that. Is it that I have to begin again? I have to get back. Either that or I sit here and listen to the voices. (*Flats* 123)

'Unable to arrive at a sense of going forward or backward', Houston slips into another identity, Portland, who 'stagger[s] into the field' to begin a precise process of mapping the space, defining its limits with a cartography of footsteps: 'Portland stood up and took two steps forward. He looked neither to the right nor to the left. He clenched his hands and set his mouth in a firm line' (*Flats* 143). This is the second form of influence: with a cacophony of outside opinions inhibiting progress, the only option is to look inward, hold fast and retrench.

For the first time in the novel, we are presented not with an abstract space beyond delineation, but with a finite space with clear boundaries. Where previously figures had defined their relationship by arbitrarily drawing lines in the sand, now the space declares its limits: Portland's 'only alternative is to work the edge [...] There is no time to define space. Space must define Portland' (*Flats* 140). The possibility of unlimited movement is now circumscribed by fixed geographical extremes, 'I should move on [...] if I play the corners right I can make it to the other side of the field and come up parallel to where I am now' (*Flats* 140). It is noteworthy also that, for the first time, Wurlitzer chooses to specify a figure name/place name with a clear, rather than substantially random, significance: 'there are two Portlands. One on the *East Coast* and one on the *West Coast*. I choose either one or both' (*Flats* 134, italics mine).

Suddenly, the two layers of the novel's palimpsest – the barren uncharted wilderness overlaid by a patchwork of U.S. cities – approach correspondence: the perception that the wilderness has, in fact, limits is reflected in a real-world geography where Portland Maine and Portland Oregon mark the extremities of mainland America. The impression is one of

accommodation, even retreat. In the fiction, Portland the figure stops and holds his position: 'I am not concerned with direction [...] He cancelled himself out so as not to go backward or forward' (*Flats* 151). In the physical world, we are presented with trace references to an America which has also reached the limits of its geographical journey, from the arrival of the first settlers (Portland Maine was established in 1623) through to the expansion that took the frontier to the edge of the Pacific: Portland Oregon is in the Willamette Valley at the end of the Oregon Trail which brought settlers to the West in the mid-1800s.

This issue of living within limits captures the political mood in America as Nixon took power in 1968. Where Kennedy had spoken ambitiously of a frontier which held 'out the promise of more sacrifice instead of more security', Nixon spoke to a country chastened by its South East Asian experience whose Manifest Destiny would have to be realized by more cautious means; 'the time has come' Nixon said, for other nations in the Free World to bear their fair share of the burden of defending peace and freedom'.⁵⁶ It is worth noting that when Portland spots another figure in the field – attired significantly perhaps in 'a khaki fatigue hat' – he goes out his way to avoid engaging him (*Flats* 149).

The narrative voice's final incarnation in *Flats* is ironically called Mobile: supposed to be a 'fluid man' he ends the novel *immobile*, 'he lay on his back on the yellow rain slicker. He opened his right eye and noticed the light slowly cover him' (*Flats* 159). In one respect, this is the culmination of the novel's abstract expression of entropy: a final withdrawal from movement, a final diffusion of energy into a uniform glow. At the same time however the figure of Mobile is also the final expression of the novel's allegorical trajectory. In this, the frontier – the space within and around the novel's trace American geography – moves from being a site of progress and destiny to a site of compromise and reversal as the optimism of a first encounter with the wilderness founders on its own contradictions, the fear of the unknown, an inclination towards savagery. Ultimately, the project of hopeful expansion and expansiveness retreats into stillness and introspection as it has to live with its own defeats. Thus Mobile retains the ambition to keep moving even as his options diminish: 'there are no more distances between places'; 'we are no longer involved in strategies of going somewhere together'; 'all that he leaves are questions and there are no questions to ask' (*Flats* 157-9).

In *Flats* a sense, or memory, of the idea of America is interrogated by an imagined return to the circumstances of the first encounter with its wilderness. In this, a privileged Emersonian transcendentalist experience of landscape is destabilised by the recognition that survival in early America was also the formative experience of confronting unseen threats.

⁵⁶ John F. Kennedy, 15 July 1960. Richard M. Nixon, 8 August 1968.

And in this too, the re-invocation of frontier progress and dynamism has to confront, via the novel's images of circling without progress, an eventual contemporary inertia: 'as the gray increases, my own process drops away [...] there is nothing to choose. I have all there is. *There is nothing to go toward*' (*Flats* 157, italics mine).

In *Flats*, Whitman's open road becomes a road-to-nowhere in which a mythic sense of national exhilaration at the possibilities of its own space recedes. In a reference to the 'dawn's early light' of the American national anthem, the novel's benighted characters' 'last stirrings before the first light' anticipate not the triumphant 'full glory [of] the star-spangled banner' but a new day which is as likely to bring conflagration as illumination: 'in the distance the sky was brighter, as if from a long row of flames or the first hint of dawn' (*Flats* 123,128). This sense of a national journey into despair is developed in Wurlitzer's next novel, *Quake*.

3.5. *Quake*

Quake (1972) completes Wurlitzer's trilogy on America's turn-of-the decade 'time of great adversity' by combining the ontological shifts of the previous novels into a text which excavates layers of cultural and historical assumption to expose the primal fault-lines beneath. In an errand to the latest western frontier, Los Angeles, returned to a formless wilderness by an earthquake, the novel displaces one version of America – predicated on progress, fixed on prosperity, projected through the movies – in favour of another, where contemporary sophistications recede before an underlying brutality they can no longer deny. In this, *Nog's* highlighting of mythical instability and *Flats'* diagnosis of inertia and retreat culminate in what first presents as a terse act of journalistic witness-to-disaster, but in what ultimately is forced to report on a displacement of familiar forms of social reassurance, as the contestations inside America's mythological pretensions surface through the rubble. A glimpse into an American abyss at a point where, looking toward the Bicentennial, the U.S. was preparing to 'reach back to our Nation's founding and distil those themes that can illumine its future'.⁵⁷

So perceived, *Quake's* account of a descent into primitive violence at America's latest frontier is framed inside contemporary contexts which allow it to debate the ultimate meaning, and stability, of the foundational act of confronting savagery with civilisation at the first frontier. Set against the urban and internecine violence of the late 60s and early 70s, it sombrely concludes that America's New Frontier is fraying, and the mythical advance of

⁵⁷ Richard M. Nixon, 'Statement on Naming Members to the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 3 July 1969', in *APP* [accessed 13 June 2016]

'Americanisation' is reversing. As one of the characters struggling to survive on L.A.'s devastated streets says: 'there are a lot of bad willed people trying to take over and the country won't have a chance if they do'.⁵⁸

3.5.1. The Politics of Devastation

The raw politics of *Quake* emerge as the palimpsest of contemporary urban coordinates, and the distractions of the latest popular cultural associations, are steadily stripped back.

The action plays out in a tight geographic compass. From the Tropicana Motel – home in the late 60s to The Byrds and The Doors' Jim Morrison – on to Santa Monica Boulevard, Melrose Avenue and the Hollywood Freeway, we are in familiar popular cultural territory: affluent Beverley Hills, the centres of the American movie industry. But that very familiarity suggests we are at an emblematic site as well, a cultural fault-line where movie stars ('I'm not a hooker' says one character, 'I'm an actress. You've seen me in a hundred pictures') rub shoulders with the countercultural residents of the Tropicana (one of the guests 'plays bass guitar somewhere and knows about mushrooms and Kundalini'); where gaudy prosperity encounters the critics of American materialism (*Quake* 14,59).

This sense that we are not just in Hollywood but in a topological expression of America's cultural extremes is compounded by the fact we are at the physical frontier, the furthest and newest point of Turner's 'Americanization', on the edge of the western desert, where the lifestyle has 'a different set of rituals and corruptions', far from 'New York [which is] different than L.A.' (*Quake* 9). That this latest expression of America however has got 'some kind of fault underneath' (the San Andreas Fault), and that the novel begins with a tectonic shift that disfigures its urban precision, predicate a text where geographical deformation becomes an emblem for national fragility:

I walked down Santa Monica Boulevard.

The sewers had been ripped open and the heavy smell of shit and rotten gas burdened the air. The street had buckled down the middle [...] I walked towards a luncheonette up the street. A red Chevrolet had gone half way through the plate glass window [...] A man's head was half way through the windshield. (*Quake* 36)

⁵⁸ Rudolph Wurlitzer, *Quake* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995), p.95. Hereafter *Quake*.

The narrator's nightmare day, from being 'thrown out of bed', through progressive injury and mutilation and on, finally, to inarticulate oblivion ("“Ooooooooooh,” I prayed before I passed out') is a journey through an America which is at an historical point of self-examination:

“We're paying for the sins of a hundred years.”

“At least that. Five hundred years.”

“Call it two hundred. You always exaggerate.” (*Quake* 158,129)

Whether the national journey begins with the first Spanish arrival in America in the late 1400s or with the Union's founding in 1776, this morbidly comic conversation amongst a group of the newly homeless projects a sense that, after the 60s, the story of American civilisation was in danger of ending.

As early as 1965, the race riots that burned through Watts in L.A were described by *Life* magazine in near apocalyptic terms: 'If a single event can be picked to mark the dividing line [of the sixties] it was Watts'.⁵⁹ In March 1968, when Johnson abandoned re-election, he spoke of 'a house divided against itself by the spirit of faction, of party, of region, of religion, of race [as] a house that cannot stand [...] There is divisiveness amongst us all'.⁶⁰ And, as the 60s progressed, so Americans became used to images of domestic conflict alongside the images of increasing desperation in Vietnam. On the eve of Kent State, where four students were killed by the National Guard, Nixon described American soldiers as 'the greatest' and student protestors as 'bums [...] blowing up the campuses'.⁶¹ Lytle describes a climate where countercultural radicals and conservative professionals both adopted ad hoc military postures and 'American society fractured more completely than it had at any time since the Civil War era'.⁶²

Nightly news images of social unrest are reflected in the language Wurlitzer uses to describe the disorder of his post-quake L.A. There are 'maniacs out there, fighting a war. Whole gangs running around killing themselves, looting and shooting off their guns' and cops who 'are just crazy' says one bystander, 'I saw them gun butt a guy and then pistol whip him' (*Quake* 45). Middle-class citizens have formed paramilitary groups ("“We're in control here and you might begin to wish otherwise” [...] He was dressed in blood stained white yachting pants and a pale blue alpaca sweater. He carried a double-barrelled shotgun in both hands') who apply their own form of law and order: 'We've been training for years for something like

⁵⁹ Quoted in Anderson, p.74.

⁶⁰ Lyndon B. Johnson, 'The President's Address to the Nation Announcing Steps to Limit the War in Vietnam, 31 March 1968', in *APP* [accessed 16 August 2012]

⁶¹ Richard M. Nixon's impromptu remarks at The Pentagon, 30 April 1970, quoted in Hal Bochin, *Richard Nixon : Rhetorical Strategist* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p.66.

⁶² Lytle, p.x.

this. [We are] neighbourhood people. We're sanctioned [...] The ALPCS' (*Quake* 64-5,78). We're even offered near journalistic references that recall Kent State ('Is this a war or what? [...] It was probably some National Guard People who got the wrong information and went a little berserk') and the Day of Rage looting of Chicago in October 1969: 'we walked past the remains of small expensive shops. Brightly coloured clothes lay scattered on the street among paperback books and bronze bathroom fixtures' (*Quake* 48-9,89).

Quake's initial impression is of an America on the edge of anarchy: the 'pathological groups' into which the city has splintered suggest the national breakdown of consensus which, for example, had seen Democrats fighting Democrats in Chicago in 1968 (*Quake* 133). At one point a prisoner 'in a red bathrobe and heavy thonged sandals' confronts his civilian militia guard:

"Answer me, you cretin. We still have rights. This is still a democracy. I'll prosecute your ass out of this entire state. I demand to know your name."
 "Arthur," the guard replied quietly. Then he hit him on the side of the head with the butt of his rifle. (*Quake* 74-5)

But to adopt the view of some commentators that the novel simply 'demonstrate[s] the rapid collapse of civic and social norms', or that its narrative voice is simply on a picaresque tour through episodes of emblematic depravity, is to downplay the degree to which the narrative locates the breakdown inside a wider debate over contested mythologies.⁶³ It is not just that L.A. (America) 'is the worst shithole place [you've] ever seen' and it needs only one key event to shatter its carapace of 'palm trees and orange juice bars' but rather the degree to which the process of shattering involves a confrontation with, and erosion of, national ideas: the novel's characters speculate that 'the entire country might be totalled' and 'this ain't just an earthquake ... More is at stake here. Whole state like this. Mobs. Looting. Maybe the whole country' (*Quake* 16,69,110). So perceived, *Quake* realises gross political crisis as urban nightmare, civilisation and savagery tussling anew as they did in the frontier past, with Los Angeles at the epicentre of America's persisting cultural and mythological fault-lines.

3.5.2. The Hollywood Frontier

The rhetoric of the New Frontier was no less prominent at the end of the 60s than it was at the start. By 1968, however, the idea of new national definition had been reconfigured by Nixon as 'a new front', 'a new road to progress', 'a new dawn' and 'the beginning of the

⁶³ Seed, p.81.

American generation in world history'.⁶⁴ For Nixon, the perceived challenge was not to define a grand mythical vision like Kennedy but to find an exit from a crisis in self-belief. 'The next president', Nixon said, 'will face challenges [...] greater than those of Washington and Lincoln. Because for the first time in our nation's history, an American President will face not only the problem of restoring peace abroad but of restoring peace at home'. The journey towards the frontier was now one of national rescue as much as re-assertion, 'the time has come for us to leave the valley of despair and climb the mountain so that we may see the glory of the dawn – a new day for America'. This is the frontier journey embedded in the text of *Quake*: an errand through a terrain of national break-down in the hope of renewal beyond. In this mythical struggle between civilisation and savagery however, *savagery* now has the upper hand.

Quake takes the reader into three frontier spaces simultaneously. Geographic – L.A. as territorial edge. Popular cultural – the Californian West is, in Wurlitzer's own terms, furthest from the claustrophobic culture of the historical East. And primal – the earthquake has shattered the modern frontier city and returned it to a desert wilderness where 'we all have to start from the beginning now and discover who we are and what we're made of' (*Quake* 65). Guiding us through this multivalent frontier is another of Wurlitzer's latter-day pioneers, newly 'fallen in [...] from New York', drifting without historical baggage, open to opportunity: 'I wasn't above panhandling, spiritual or otherwise, movie extra, weekend carpentry or genteel smuggling' (*Quake* 9). The narrator's circumstances invoke the terms of the first frontier encounter, 'the beginning', as if to gauge whether the foundational narrative is still able to energise America.

The narrator's journey is partly a physical one. He is forced to strip naked by gunmen, his body gathers wounds, he is treated like an animal, 'Soooooooooooo' shouts one of his captors with a call used for herding pigs, 'Round 'em up' (*Quake* 82). And as he is physically stripped back, so he descends towards increasingly basic, and barely articulate, impulse. Directly after the earthquake he drifts into poolside sex with a fellow, nameless, motel guest: 'the words around us blurred and carried no definition', barely any preamble, just activity, 'I had been close to removing myself from words for a long time' (*Quake* 21). Casually eating potato salad, sitting beside a corpse in a crashed car, the narrator finds 'something unaccountable and weird had been released inside [him], a manic carnivorous force that was causing the muscles around his mouth to twitch uncontrollably' (*Quake* 39). Drafted into an excavation squad, he is happy to march with sudden (religious) conviction – 'We walked down

⁶⁴ Richard M. Nixon, 8 August 1968.

Santa Monica Boulevard [...] We whistled “Onward, Christian Soldiers” – but later he is equally happy to degenerate alongside his captors:

Just let me stand outside and guard these people. I’ll shoot their limbs off one by one if they make a false move. I’ll hunt around and find more victims to put inside the circle. I’ll wear a fatigue cap and swear allegiance to a fucking softball team. (*Quake* 77)

From the point therefore where, at dawn, the narrator loses first his self-image (‘The mirror’, site of his reflection, ‘shattered over the dresser’) and then his formal identity (a girl asks his name ‘I don’t know’ he replies, ‘I don’t know how to answer that’), he is sequentially brutalised before surrendering to brutality himself (*Quake* 7,17). By nightfall, he has lost all humanity, removed from language completely, reduced to animal grunts – “Wooooooo,” I cried out. “Wooooooo ...” – scrabbling around for a loose brick so he can help build a wall and join a group who are constructing a shelter against the dark (*Quake* 155). The narrator’s physical journey cumulatively inscribes a core transformation where the foundational encounter between civilisation and savagery produces not some form of providential outcome, but its bleak animal opposite instead.

Critically, this transformation throws into relief, or is prompted by, a very particular set of cultural conditions. The gunmen who herd the narrator are caught up in a civic ‘civil war [where] Melrose has declared war against Wilshire’, two of Hollywood’s most attractive commercial addresses, and are likely to be ‘Knights of Columbus or a bowling league’, a charitable Catholic fraternity that included Kennedy himself as a member or a familiar expression of American blue-collar solidarity (*Quake* 38,67). The prisoners’ assembly-point is a rope circle by a Texaco station, surrounded by ‘the remains of expensive colonial and modern homes’, a pile of bodies at its centre (*Quake* 66). When a gunman profanes a young male prisoner, it is on a high school football field and summary justice is being hanged from the goal-line cross bar. We are never allowed to forget, in other words, that degeneration and degradation are happening in a distinctly American context and on the modern frontier. Further: that the frontier was, and *is*, always already a site where the balance between order and brutality is precarious and any invocation of its foundational virtues must simultaneously recognise its capacity to promote the inhuman.

Shortly before *Quake* was written, Americans experienced what was perhaps the most traumatic shock of the beleaguered New Frontier project in Vietnam. The massacres at My Lai and My Khe in March 1968 – where Lt. William Calley’s 1st Platoon Charlie Company killed as many as five hundred unarmed South Vietnamese civilians – together with the subsequent cover-up and explosion of media coverage, prompted some commentators to

amplify the rhetoric of disintegration that had previously described America's internal factionalism into a language of terminal cultural repudiation. In *The New York Times*, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr suggested My Lai was 'a moment of truth where we realise that we are not a virtuous nation'; *Time* described 'a graver phenomenon than the horror following the assassination of President Kennedy. Historically it is far more crucial'.⁶⁵ In this context, *Quake's* summary executions, wholesale shootings, and embattled rhetoric recalling the confusion over allies and insurgents in Vietnam – 'Cripple the sons of bitches', says one armed guard, 'They ain't no civilians. They saboteurs. That's what they are. Guerrillas' – capture that historical moment when Americans seemed to have surrounded themselves by violence (*Quake* 70). As helicopters skim overhead, 'men with red and green ribbons on their fatigue hats' adopt military postures but 'degenerate [...] into street scum', arbitrating over life and death like gunfighters in a Western movie, or American G.I.s in the 'Indian country' of Vietnam: 'he stared at me, his gun unwavering. "Well, all I know is that you're too far north. Anybody too far north I don't like"' (*Quake* 115,134,47).

The novel's contemporary political engagement, however, is not limited to this notion of a return to a raw experience of frontier. When the first reports of My Lai emerged in 1969, few Americans believed them. *The Wall Street Journal* interviewed two hundred people and reported that 'a great number' were reluctant to acknowledge the massacre even happened.⁶⁶ The mother of a dead soldier told *CBS News*: 'Our men are calm soldiers. Our men are brave soldiers – that's the way they're trained. We don't have bad soldiers'.⁶⁷ And added to the disbelief was a sense of conspiracy: 'The story was planted by Vietcong sympathisers and people inside the country who are trying to get us out of Vietnam sooner' said one respondent to the *Journal*. Kendrick Oliver suggests that the American public 'experienced a kind of cognitive dissonance and sought refuge in denial', principally because both the press and the administration had previously failed to acknowledge 'the ethical content and human consequences of the nation's war-fighting methods'.⁶⁸ *Quake* however suggests another possibility, less solely attributable to the misinformation handed out in Saigon. Confronted with unexpected horror, the novel suggests, Americans not only have a ready tendency to take up arms, frontier-style, but to do so without affect, allowing self-absorption to displace emotional connection.

⁶⁵ *New York Times*, 4 April 1971, p.56; *Time*, 12 April 1971, p.19 quoted in Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p.3.

⁶⁶ *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 December 1969, quoted in Oliver, p.53.

⁶⁷ *CBS Evening News*, 16 December, 1969, quoted in Oliver, p.53.

⁶⁸ Oliver, p.54.

This lack of affect is conveyed, in part, by prose which seems to report rather than react. In one horrific episode, for example, the narrator is hit by a grenade. ‘When I came to, there was a roaring in my ears and my nose was bleeding. A piece of shrapnel lodged in my shoulder. But nothing was broken’: no emotion, only physical description (*Quake* 93). Later he witnesses some ad hoc street executions with similar equanimity, ‘a guard squeezed off a shot at the woman on the sidewalk. She was in the act of standing when the bullet smashed through her back. She pitched forward across the man, who was running towards her’ (*Quake* 93). This disengaged language contributes to an overall experience of detachment, of an affect-free narrative voice witnessing human depravity and suffering personal abuse itself with equal composure. Early in the novel, for example, the narrator dispassionately observes a family crowded inside a poolside chalet. Bizarrely incestuous (one of them ‘lay back and let his brother slowly jerk him off’) and morbidly self-analytical (‘That’s the trouble with this family [...] We always bullshit around and discuss things and whatever happens passes us by’), they suggest a satirical representation of a self-indulgently subversive counterculture:

We were signed up on this live programme [...] it was a Sunday night special with other singing families. Only we were going to get on and fuck like crazy [...] It’s our way of changing the structure. (*Quake* 27,30)

In the aftermath of the earthquake however their agit-prop project becomes a detached exercise in self-preservation:

We’re not making any move to grow, to figure out enlightened strategies. Why not go out and loot and get the hell out? The fucking will take care of itself. It’s overrated anyway. I say loot and plunder and think of the next twenty years. (*Quake* 31)

Later, as a column of naked prisoners heads towards a makeshift detention camp, we witness a ‘middle-aged couple whispering angrily to each other in front of us’, seemingly indifferent to their situation: ‘he told her that she was rotten spoiled and that she had no identity of her own [...] she told him that was all right because she had been balling Bert for the last two years’ (*Quake* 87). In these examples the lack of inflection projects a bleak satirical image of Americans who have normalised their own grotesque self-indulgence.

When the narrator stumbles into a Hamburger Hamlet however we move from the satirical to the political consequences – in the shattered gaudiness of American fast-food commerce – of this disengaged immersion in one’s own appetites. A confrontation over food becomes a surreal version of a Western gunfight, played out with broken champagne bottles and culminating in an emotionless killing:

I held the knife in front of me with both hands and he plunged onto it, as if that is what he had wanted all along. The broken bottle scraped my shoulder and neck and he tried to swing it back into me but he was already dying. The knife went up to the hilt. *It felt very good.* (*Quake* 125, italics mine)

Underpinning *Quake*'s account of descent is a sense of self-interest predicated on prosperity and entitlement. The gunmen who roam West Hollywood are middle-class; gunfights take place in fast-food joints; some characters assume they'll star in TV shows, others scramble for cash ('an old woman in a pink slip sat among hundreds of envelopes, tearing them open looking for money'); even the narrator is assumed to be a film star: 'I'm not exactly sure who you are' says the actress he meets, 'John Hodiak or Michael Rennie. Maybe Van Johnson. Some forties bimbo' (*Quake* 43,62).

The abiding impression is that *Quake* inscribes not only the brutal reversion of a modern frontier space – as if somewhere in the American psyche Turner's tension between civilisation and savagery has never quite been resolved – but a recursion at the frontier of contemporary expectation as well. Just as the novel's events play out against a backdrop of affluence, so the eruptions in late 60s and early 70s America played out against an assumption of uninterrupted prosperity. Protesting students, for example, enjoyed unprecedented access to university education and were as likely to be angry about a failure of entitlement as they were about politics. A 1967 poll by the University of Missouri revealed that the number one student 'gripe' was 'Not enough student participation in administration'; the Vietnam War was number five.⁶⁹ Nixon's 'Silent Majority', meanwhile, was dominated by a conservative suburban lower middle class. The novel becomes an expression of the recursive politics of prosperity: the greater the affluence, the greater the erosion of affect in the solipsistic fight to protect it. And therein lies *Quake*'s chilling political conclusion.

3.5.3. Twilight in America

Quake suggests that the mythical journey which began with American identity's emergence from the experience of frontier has now tumbled back into the seismic fault-line where once civilisation tussled with savagery, 'this is one monster of a disaster and the country is over' (*Quake* 37). The pioneer-narrator reverts to the bestial, 'I was definitely coming unwrapped'; institutions turn from protection to aggression, 'the city has broken into little

⁶⁹ Quoted in Farber and Bailey, p.348.

pathological groups'; commerce turns production into annihilation, 'we're on our way to a concentration camp'; L.A., the affluent emblem of the modern frontier, fragments into 'fallen billboards and chunks of neon' (*Quake* 125,133,71,99). And, in the novel's closing section, the relentless reversals ultimately transform the notion of the New Frontier itself from exhilarating challenge into a last-ditch line of protection from an America where, in Nixon's words, 'we see Americans hating each other; fighting each other; killing each other at home'.⁷⁰

As the sun sets over West Hollywood, a group of survivors – one of them the shattered image of a sports jock 'in a blue and gold football helmet', another an image of modish affluence 'in white cotton pants and a black Nehru shirt' – still find time for a timeless American ritual:

One of them dribbled gasoline from a plastic container over the pile [of furniture] and lit a match to it. The wood burst into flames and they soon had hamburgers cooking on a grill and hot dogs and marshmallows roasting on the ends of fibre glass fishing rods. (*Quake* 130,133,134)

Any suggestion however that this barbeque might represent a return to suburban continuity is savagely dismissed. The group place hot marshmallows over the narrator's eyes, they cover him in catsup and pour whisky 'over [his] face and down to [his] crotch, they place a severed head on his stomach' (*Quake* 135). The narrator is transformed into an item for consumption in an American tradition of continual national reinvention which has now been perverted into seeing everything as a disposable commodity, even human beings:

They'll rebuild all this and we won't remember it happened. That's the way of this country. Thank god, my dear, that we can't remember who we are, what we've come from. But it does give us a little pocket of depraved time to stretch out in. (*Quake* 136)

And the speech goes on to express an underlying ambition and assertiveness that suggests the aberration is far from momentary:

This is where the garage used to be. We'll rebuild that. The pool still stands. Oh honey luscious, but we had some wild extravaganzas by that little hole of chlorine water. Martha must have pleased a thousand people on this veranda. Not just your usual trash either. We figured to take it all, sugar: politics, show business, the whole creamy meringue. (*Quake* 136)

As an emblem of fragility, the earthquake suggests that the tectonic social shifts and political splits of turn-of-the-decade America represent a point-of-no-return: the San Andreas Fault is

⁷⁰ Richard M. Nixon, 8 August 1968.

no more likely to close than the barbecue party is likely to stop fighting for ‘the whole creamy meringue’.

As night falls, the narrator arrives at a temporary shelter, a warehouse filled with ‘hundreds of wooden crates and rows of white enamel bathtubs and toilets’ (*Quake* 139). But even as the image suggests the capacity to rebuild physically – new bathrooms – and, as it were, spiritually – they’re white sites of cleansing – it ultimately suggests that the ‘little pocket of depravity’ is permanent. The warehouse is a zone of separation rather than salvation. Couples have fallen victim to mutual distrust (‘I know he’s in there’ says one woman of her husband, ‘The little worm [...] I knew he would leave me when it got tough [he’s] in that crate’); the narrator encounters a family talking of a romantic return to a bucolic America (‘There will be green grass where all the filth is now [...] We won’t make the same mistakes next time’) in the same moment they are cutting their wrists and repudiating their own children:

“Don’t listen to the little pervert,” the woman said. “She happens to be our only daughter. She led us here with her groovy far-out friends. She said they were the only ones who would let us through. She said they had prepared for this apocalypse for a long time”. (*Quake* 140-1,144,143)

Rather than being allowed or able to rebuild, these divergent fragments of humanity are consumed by a terminal fire: ‘screams and yells came from inside several crates. I turned and faced the inside of my own crate. They were still crouched in their separate corners’ (*Quake* 145).

The American sixties ended in a profound shift from consensus to division. Nixon’s ‘Silent Majority’ effected a drift towards introspection that not only turned his slender victory of 1968 into a landslide by 1972, but that has largely persisted in American politics ever since. No surprise then perhaps that *Quake*’s last image is of a *new* New Frontier inside the, *newly* devastated, ‘American’ space of L.A. Where, in the American past, the frontier marked the mythical advance of civilisation and progress, now it has become a makeshift wall ironically designed to protect a small group of survivors from the perceived threat of a new savage ‘other’ – the novel’s narrator, reduced to the barely human by his exposure to a latter-day American wilderness:

I reached the edge of the wall. Little dribbles of rubble fell from the top. One of the guards peered down at me [...] “Unnnnnnn,” I said. The guard raised his rifle and pointed it at me. (*Quake* 158)

Each of Wurlitzer's Nixon Years novels imagines a journey into a fantastic – or nightmare – ontological zone. But they are not journeys of escape. Rather, they expose the denials and contradictions inside the foundational myth that saw the first settlers' errand into the wilderness as a providential act, and the expansion of the frontier as an exercise in civilisation. As such they are urgently political: ontological mediations between a real-world America where myth has displaced both history and actuality, and a series of *imagined* Americas which, stripped back, denaturalise the Kennedy narrative of progress and national community and progressively lay bare the unavowed circumstances that would culminate, in the early 70s, in that narrative's collapse.

Wurlitzer's emphasis on the frontier as a periodically specific site of ontological criticality meanwhile also invokes two other contested belief systems: a destabilised exceptionalism in the conflicted cowboys and compromised soldiers of *Nog* and *Flats* and, in the shattered affluence of *Quake's* L.A., a critique of personal success as birthright. The near religious zeal, but ultimate ambiguity, that reside in America's conjoining of foundational exceptionalism and natural geographical abundance into a myth of individual destiny are expressed in the Nixon Years novels of Stanley Elkin.

Chapter 4

Stanley Elkin, the American Myth of Success and the Crisis in Affluence.

The Nixon Years novels of Stanley Elkin explore a third American myth. And they do so by mediating a climate of crisis through a third indicative strategy in U.S. postmodernist writing: critically interrogating the interplay between myth and history inside fabulations and wild extravagances of language which criticism has tended to regard as more pyrotechnic than critical or politically engaged. This chapter will analyse two works which effectively bracket the Nixon Years, *A Bad Man* (1967) and *The Franchiser* (1976). In both, I will argue, the distinctively glittering surface of Elkin's writing betrays a deep conversation inside American culture about the pursuit of affluence that is one perceived consequence of the national narrative of new world opportunity. And the nine years between the novels, coinciding with the early 70s recession, track a turn-of-the-decade transition from moral concern to full-blown political crisis: the point, in Jameson's periodisation, where the 60s notion that 'everything was possible' ended.¹

Elkin's subject is the myth of success, the 'tradition', according to Richard Weiss, 'that every American child receives, as part of his birthright, the freedom to mould his own life'.² Elkin's concern, however, is less to do with the exhilarations of new world mobility, and more to do with the contestations between an historic belief in individual self-assertion, and a moral reserve in the face of affluence and acquisition. Elkin's protagonists are entrepreneurs whose strategies for success are scrutinised in fabulations which amplify to the point of grotesqueness their terms of moral, institutional and historical judgement. In *A Bad Man*, Leo Feldman is a department store magnate who arrives in a bizarre prison accused, it appears, of overreaching on the gift of salesmanship by indulging his customers' most extreme desires. In *The Franchiser*, Ben Flesh is a trader in licensed business formats whose American empire of trademarks disintegrates, while his own body consumes itself, as the U.S. economy falters after Vietnam and the OPEC crisis. The novels critique an America that was, in many ways, struggling with a success narrative that risked confusing affluence with well-being and whose historical legitimacy, in the financial crisis of Nixon's second term, was being increasingly questioned.

Elkin's distinctive style meanwhile registers as a heady lurching back-and-forth between disorientating linguistic conundrums and image-rich aggregations. The reader is at

¹ Jameson, 'Periodising the 60s', pp.207,183.

² Weiss, p.3. See also Huber, pp.107-123.

times caught up, like Feldman in his prison, in language as 'complex and arbitrary as the laws of a boxed game', struggling to resolve its contradictions.³ The prison regime, for example, is described thus:

The length of their terms here proved the violence of their crimes. It meant that if love was what lay behind the efficiency of the warden's vicious system and made that system work, then it was viciousness that ultimately made love work. (*BM* 75)

No surprise that confronted with such an instrumental and verbal conundrum 'character tumbled, and even *these* men could not finally hang on to themselves' (*BM* 75).

At other times, Elkin will breathlessly catalogue visual images, capturing the surface presentations of American popular culture. *The Franchiser* opens, for example, with an apparent display of the 'depthlessness' that Jameson diagnoses in some postmodernist writing – America itself disappearing beneath, and political criticality displaced by, an imbrication of logos:

Past the orange roof and turquoise tower, past the immense sunburst of the green and yellow sign, past the golden arches [...] beneath the red and white longitudes of the enormous bucket, coming up to the thick shaft of the yellow arrow piercing the royal-blue field, he feels he is home. Is it Nashville? Elmira, New York? St. Louis County? A Florida key? The Illinois arrowhead? Indiana like a holster, Ohio like a badge? Is he North? St. Paul, Minn.? Northeast? Boston, Mass.? The other side of America? Salt Lake? Los Angeles? At the bottom of the country? The Texas udder? Where? In Colorado's frame? Wyoming like a postage stamp? Michigan like a mitten?⁴

It is, however, in the interplay between these two dominant modes of writing that Elkin constructs what might be described as postmodern parables. It is as if his novels dance across an America whose subscription to the myth of success has been realised, on the one hand, as a relentlessly gaudy succession of items-to-consume but whose historic doubts and contemporary setbacks, on the other hand, nag away beneath the glittering surface as an equally relentless set of unresolved contradictions.

In this, Elkin's protagonists loudly proclaim a cluster of success narratives – 'I am the master of all I purvey' says Feldman, 'I am Mister Softee here and Chicken from the Colonel there' says Flesh – while simultaneously embodying the unresolved anxieties of affluence: Feldman is imprisoned, Flesh's body is succumbing to MS (*BM* 185, *TF* 127). They are

³ Stanley Elkin, *A Bad Man* (McLean: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), p.66. Hereafter *BM*.

⁴ Stanley Elkin, *The Franchiser* (McLean: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), p.3. Hereafter *TF*.

postmodern Everymen, pursuing grand narratives of perceived self-realisation that are deteriorating even as they are invoked: latter-day Horatio Algiers whose rags-to-riches stories end up suspended at the edge of commercial and existential failure, in a twilight somewhere between life and death.

Elkin's volatile prose and resistance to narrative closure meanwhile position his parables inside a contemporary political critique. Their texture references, animates, and generates contestations inside, stories of American enterprise that stretch from Massachusetts Bay to Benjamin Franklin, from Henry Ford to Colonel Sanders. And to the extent that those already contested stories are, in turn, framed by topical references to Nixon Years politics and economics, Elkin is able to explore a climate of immediate social crisis by exposing the uneasiness with, and contradictions inside, a national narrative which from the seventeenth century onwards 'viewed material success as a sign of the diligent performance of the callings which God assigned to all men' but which also 'feared it as a temptation to sin'.⁵

Thus, the constant back-and-forth in *A Bad Man* between Feldman, the fast-talking salesman-entrepreneur, and Fisher, the warden who sermonises like a Puritan eschatologist, expresses a heightened version of the debate over the morality of affluence articulated by Galbraith in the 60s, and around the contradictions in capitalism examined by Bell in the 70s that 'derive from the unravelling of the threads which once held the economy and the culture together, and from the influence of the hedonism which has become the prevailing value in our society'.⁶ In *The Franchiser*, meanwhile, Ben Flesh's determination to turn his franchises into a projection of himself as a national brand captures America's preoccupation with the image and the fragile 'pseudo-event' identified by Boorstin.

'This was the postwar world. Opportunity flourished everywhere' (TF 3). Thus Elkin describes the America in which his franchiser begins his career. The salience of Elkin's analysis is located not only in his unravelling of the financial contestations that led to the economic shocks of the second Nixon administration, but in his inference that appearance had displaced value in the entire mythology of American success. As one late 60s observer noted, Nixon had 'an advertising man's approach to his work [...] politics were products to be sold to the public – this one today, that one tomorrow, depending on the discounts and the state of the market'.⁷

⁵ Weiss, p.27.

⁶ Bell, p.xi.

⁷ Joe McGinnis, *The Selling of the President, 1968* (New York: Trident Press, 1969), p.31.

4.1. The Politics of Elkin's Rhetoric.

Commentary on Elkin has largely been driven by his 'linguistic extravagance'; what Frank Kermode called 'sour manic prose' and Robert Colbert 'stunning verbal virtuosity'.⁸ To that extent, Elkin's relentless passion for kinetic rhetoric and richly conceived lists has focussed attention on what David Dougherty describes as 'an abundance [...] in rhetoric that provides intellectual pleasure while calling our attention away from [his] characters or their situations'.⁹ And while his language is often applauded in isolation, Peter J. Bailey notes, critics have also viewed his episodic, and often centrifugal, novels as 'ultimately shapeless, self-indulgent, uncontrolled'.¹⁰

The difficulty of navigating – or of finding larger structures in – Elkin's pyrotechnics have divided his commentators into broadly two camps. Those early observers who find meaning in his linguistic style in and of itself. And those later who seek to position Elkin inside a wider tradition on the way towards distilling out attention to particular themes. For Thomas LeClair, 'Elkin's favourite performances are oral – tales, reminiscences, speeches, harangues, directives, lectures, routines, jokes, patter' and these verbal excesses express the rich but eccentric lives of a series of obsessive characters who are themselves shaped by their tones of voice: 'in Elkin's fiction world, the perspectual intelligence – rational, balanced, Apollonian gives way to the obsessive imagination [...] it rules character, dictates structure, and permeates the voices Elkin loves to throw'.¹¹ Colbert argues similarly that Elkin 'is a stunning verbal virtuoso out of Joyce and Bellow' who portrays the 'modern American as obsessed salesman and rhetorician' in prose which turns 'an unwavering gaze [...] on the "stuff" of modern mass civilisation'.¹² The idea that Elkin's rhetoric exploits 'the dreck and tacky tack of modern America' also features in Larry McCaffery's analysis: 'excessive language operates to unmask the beauty and wonder that is normally locked within the vulgar and the ordinary'.¹³ In going on, however, to speculate on some of the structures Elkin appears to build, McCaffery is also the first commentator to detect a mythical sensibility in Elkin's fabulations. Characters use

⁸ Peter J. Bailey, *Reading Stanley Elkin* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), p.ix. Frank Kermode, 'Love and Do as You Please: Review of *The Living End*', *New York Review of Books*, 1 August 1979, p.46. Robert Edward Colbert, 'The American Salesman as Pitchman and Poet in the Fiction of Stanley Elkin', *Critique*, 21 (1979), 52-58 (p.52).

⁹ David C. Dougherty, *Stanley Elkin* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), p.2.

¹⁰ Bailey, p.ix.

¹¹ Thomas LeClair, 'The Obsessional Fiction of Stanley Elkin', *Contemporary Literature*, 16 (1975), 146-162 (pp.156,146).

¹² Colbert, pp.52,53.

¹³ Larry McCaffery, 'Stanley Elkin's Recovery of the Ordinary', *Critique*, 21 (1979), 39-51 (p.40).

flamboyant rhetoric, McCaffery suggests, in the 'existential construction of value systems to help fill the void'.¹⁴ Confronted with the disorientations of 'America's own growth during the 1950s and 60s', they seek refuge in fragile but fabulous narratives which 'intensify their ordinary existence [...] protect[-ing] themselves against primal emptiness by overwhelming themselves with profusion and excess'.¹⁵

Three book-length studies largely base their analyses in variations on McCaffrey's theme. Elkin, Bailey suggests, is 'perhaps our most dedicated literary chronicler and critic of the American ordinary' and, alongside Borgen (1980) and Dougherty (1991), he argues that the author's works are first and foremost studies of character, and of an American tendency to self-mythologise.¹⁶ Here, Elkin's language enacts 'a transformation of the ordinary and the familiar into the extraordinary and strange' as his protagonists supercharge lives that might otherwise disappear without trace.¹⁷

For Doris Borgen, the 'ordinary' in play in *A Bad Man* and *The Franchiser* is a figure she identifies as 'the archetype of the Jewish peddler'.¹⁸ Locating Elkin inside a tradition of Jewish-American writing which focuses, she argues, on anxiety, dark irony and social mobility – and whose emblematic characters include Willy Loman's salesman hero, Dave Singleman – Leo Feldman and Ben Flesh are characters defined by 'a complete devotion to [a] philosophy of salesmanship'.¹⁹ In *A Bad Man*, salesmanship involves Leo selling himself as the extraordinary Jewish outsider who challenges conformity. In *The Franchiser*, Ben Flesh is the Jewish outsider who seeks social acceptance by enthusiastically selling the franchises that 'celebrate the homogenization of America' that in essence, Borgen argues, 'symbolise his American-ness'.²⁰

Jewishness is important in Bailey's detailed analyses too. *A Bad Man*, he argues is structured around a duel between Leo and the prison warden, Fisher: 'a conceptual dichotomy between a metaphysical Jewish perception of the world and a WASPishly Christian one'.²¹ The novel's debate over social conformity pits a notion of boundless possibility against a regime of restriction and positions itself, as a consequence, between a tradition of the Jew manoeuvring through the New World, and the ontological questions about the design and restrictions of that world also posed by Elkin's contemporaries like Coover and Pynchon. *The Franchiser*

¹⁴ McCaffery, p.40

¹⁵ McCaffery, p.43,41.

¹⁶ Bailey, p.22.

¹⁷ Bailey, p.9.

¹⁸ Doris G. Borgen, *The Fiction of Stanley Elkin* (Frankfurt: Verlag Peter D. Lang, 1980), p.101.

¹⁹ Borgen, p.105.

²⁰ Borgen, p.118.

²¹ Bailey, p.35

meanwhile explores the ontology of the Jewish entrepreneur himself whose focus on business and on show-business 'dramatise[-s] the continuity between the values those occupations assume and the perspectives upon reality they imply'.²²

It is 'a meditation on a vocation', rather than ethnicity, which defines Elkin's fiction, according to Dougherty who nonetheless also regards his novels as 'character studies' where 'merchandising as an art form is Elkin's central concern'.²³ At the same time, however, Dougherty initiates a debate about merchandising which extends into its moral and political implications for Elkin's adjacent world. Dougherty wonders whether the author is a 'compassionate chronicler of consumer culture' or a 'satiric commentator' on the degree to which merchandising limits a 'meaningful response to life's higher opportunities'.²⁴ He stops short however of concluding that either *The Franchiser* or *A Bad Man* constitutes 'social commentary', locating their ultimate impact instead in the degree to which salesmanship becomes an affirmation of both protagonists' otherwise fragile and discrete existences.

Indeed, all of Elkin's early critics touch on, but do not pursue, wider social or political contexts. Bargaen notes that Elkin has been accused of lacking 'a political and economic sensibility' but then interprets *The Franchiser's* most politically suggestive metaphor – Ben Flesh's onset of multiple sclerosis during the 70s energy crisis – as ultimately amplifying character rather than culture, they are 'blended in the hero's mind into one revolving image'.²⁵ Bailey too folds this image into a notion of individual character tragedy, rather than national politics. Ben is undone by 'the pivotal irony [...] in the fact that the man who has set himself the task of spatially uniting and homogenising his country is himself suffering from a disintegrative malady'.²⁶

More recently however Brian Rajski has placed *The Franchiser* inside a more determinedly business/economic – rather than character – domain. It is an 'exemplary work of early postmodernism', Rajski argues, by virtue of its emphasis 'on the seemingly endless reproduction of identical branded entities', Ben's franchises, which 'confirm Jean Baudrillard's contemporaneous account of a hyperreal America'.²⁷ Business-as-simulacrum, volatile interest rates, global shocks combine, Rajski suggests, to inscribe a major 'shift in the world system [...]

²² Bailey, p.106.

²³ Dougherty, pp.3,13,42.

²⁴ Dougherty, p.41.

²⁵ Bargaen, pp.123-4.

²⁶ Bailey, p.113.

²⁷ Brian Rajski, "'The Price of Money': Stanley Elkin's *The Franchiser* and the Economic Crisis of the 1970s", *Studies in American Fiction*, 41 (2014), 251-70 (p.253).

what Fernand Braudel called the “signs of autumn”: indicators of the beginning of the end of America’s long twentieth century’.²⁸

My account will similarly emphasise the political and economic events of the 70s. It will argue, however, that Elkin registers them as internal and cultural as much as external and economic: products of a cluster of cherished narratives whose instabilities deepened during the Nixon administration. In this, Elkin’s characters can never be entirely detached from the mythical traditions that drive their careers and which they come in large part to emblematised. And in this, Elkin’s language and structures, far from being incoherent or throwing attention back onto personality alone, deploy fabulation to highlight a critical connection between protagonist and political/cultural climate where both resonate to the contemporary volatilities in a success narrative that originated in America’s founding. As Flesh the Franchiser says at one point, linking his own ambitions with a vision of the modern U.S.:

I’m the Fred Astaire man. I’m the Exxon dealer, we thought you’d like to know [...] I’m a cultured man. I’m One Hour Martinizing and the Cinema I, Cinema II in the shopping centre. I’m America’s innkeeper, I’m Robo-Wash. I’m Benny Flesh [...] The culture? *I’m* the culture! (TF 193)

4.2. A Bad Man

Tony Tanner described *A Bad Man* as an ‘impressive novel about guilt’.²⁹ And one can certainly argue that the text’s extravagances ultimately coalesce around a character who is confronting his own incarceration. But this would be to propose an ultimate moral clarity in the trajectory of Leo Feldman’s prison career which detaches it from the circumstances of his upbringing, the mythologies he channels, and from the cultural and historical conditions in which his career as a department store entrepreneur develops. In these respects, the novel never quite settles, tensely equivocating between clear mechanisms of judgement and a climate of contested belief which are ultimately unsure of their outcome or purpose. The novel does not finally pronounce on Feldman’s career as an American entrepreneur. It suspends itself instead inside a debate about what he might represent, whose lack of resolution intimates a crisis-to-come.

This climate of contestation is thrown into relief by the novel’s most fantastical image. Lying across Feldman’s heart is a talking homunculus, ‘there, of course, from prenatal

²⁸ Rajski, p.261.

²⁹ Tanner, p.142.

times. He was probably meant to be a twin, but something happened' (*BM* 5). The foetus most readily suggests a suppressed conscience, the frozen victim of 'some early Feldmanic aggrandizement' (*BM* 5). And indeed, when Feldman is in solitary, the 'toy twin' stirs to voice a moral judgement and warn that his heart has become 'a rack, buddy, a desert, some prehistoric potholed thing [...] It will not support life' (*BM* 127). At the same time, however, the homunculus declares emphatically, 'I'm not a good angel' nor even an 'alter ego': it is neither higher spiritual guide, nor the flipside of the person Leo has become (*BM* 128). Rather it is the plaintive loser, 'a fossilized potential' in a Darwinian race that Leo appears to have won, 'I might have been alive today but for some freak in the genes. Alas the blood's rip, alack my spilled amino acids, my done-in DNA' (*BM* 128,127). The homunculus becomes therefore a bizarre physical manifestation of the primal debate which Feldman is heir to, and which resonates through the novel's prison. It equivocates between a foundational American impulse towards surviving through achievement, and the need for moral caution. And to the extent the novel continually circles between the two, the homunculus also embodies a consequent potential descent into crisis, threatening to destroy the body that contains it, 'if his heart should enlarge, if he should have an attack, or perhaps even a heavy blow to the chest, the homunculus could penetrate the heart and kill him' (*BM* 5).

Perhaps the impact of *A Bad Man* lies less in its titular inference of crime and judgment and more in its exploration of cultural and political systems which are already unstable and now risk collapsing completely. The prison is a fabulous proxy for an America which is trying, but failing, to reach a determination on a belief system, Leo the American entrepreneur's inherited narrative of success, which itself cannot be sure of its own teleology. What eventuates is the inscription of a culture whose trajectory is beginning to stumble over the contradictions in its own guiding mythology. As Feldman announces at one point, 'we're in the homestretch of a race [...] entropy. The universe is running down [...] it's bucking and filling. It's yawning and pitching and rolling and falling. The smart money's in the vaults' (*BM* 214).

4.2.1. An American Entrepreneur.

One image, albeit an unstable one, emerges prominently from *A Bad Man's* textual complex of swirling rhetoric and shifting timeframes: Feldman as a canvas for a collection of American success stories. In this, he blends Hollywood with Horatio Alger and tracks both through a version of America's mid-twentieth century rise from depression to affluence. And

as such his eventual fate realises the unresolved contradictions inside a belief system which links exceptionalism with wealth and power on the one hand, but which risks undermining its claim to exceptionalist moral authority on the other.

Consider one of the novel's prominent allusions to popular culture. Leo is touring his department store. His mind drifts towards 'a spate of films' from the 1930s and 40s, 'comedies about stern old merchants' that had functioned as his personal 'literature' (BM 190). One particular movie emerges as Feldman reminisces about a teenage crush on Jean Arthur with 'her funny squeaky voice [and] her feisty intensity' (BM 191). The film is *The Devil and Miss Jones* (1941), a golden-age fairy tale about money, power and labour rights in a New York store, where Arthur plays Mary Jones, 'a girl Communist (sic) trying to organise the help', and Charles Coburn plays storeowner J.P. Merrick, 'the richest man in the world' and the 'devil' who goes undercover to spy on angry staff who are lynching him in effigy (BM 191).

The film offers a benign, New Deal vision of American commerce as an expression of the foundational virtues of endeavour and opportunity. Merrick, who is initially determined to crush any dispute over fundamental rights – 'The Boston Tea Party was a little disturbance' he warns resonantly – is ultimately reconciled to his workers' claims by Jean Arthur's wholesome fair-mindedness.³⁰ The film's mythical appeal, not least about commerce as socially progressive, is projected in the film's fairy tale resolution where Arthur and Merrick, still undercover but now a changed man, negotiate with the store's managers:

MISS JONES

There are moral issues involved here.

MANAGER

We are not concerned with moral issues.

MISS JONES

Why aren't we?

MANAGER

Because we aren't.

MERRICK

Moral issues are pretty important.³¹

The film resolves the potential contradictions inside the American success myth – individual determination vs collective good, wealth vs fairness – into a neat promotion of

³⁰ *The Devil and Miss Jones*, dir. by Sam Wood (RKO Radio Pictures, 1941). TC. 00:06:12.

³¹ *The Devil and Miss Jones*. TC. 01:28:45.

ultimate moral responsibility, in which Merrick the new world confidence-man-entrepreneur recasts his cunning into enlightened progress. As such, it opens up a gap in the novel between benign myth, and the sombre alternative outcome that same foundational story risks denying. Where one magnate, Merrick, reconciles with his workers, the other, Feldman, implicates his colleagues in destructive business strategies. Where one finds romance, Elkin's protagonist alienates his family and resorts to masturbatory fantasies. Where Merrick presides over an ultimate celebration of American society made whole (the film's final scene is a wedding dance), Feldman is confined to a macabre prison, facing the possibility of death.

To that extent, part of Elkin's strategy is to destabilise the perceived teleology that links the individual rags-to-riches tale with a grand narrative of moral certainty and consensual outcome. And to do that, Elkin constructs a back-story for Feldman which reads as an Alger parable manqué, where a trajectory from the rags of an itinerant adolescence during the Great Depression to the riches of post-war affluence, 'the whole country on the take', subverts its own mythical co-ordinates (*BM* 119).

When 'ISIDORE FELDMAN AND SON', Leo and his immigrant father, take their rag and junk business to Little Egypt, Southern Illinois in the 1930s, they are actors in a pivotal period in American history, and enactors of a cluster of American myths (*BM* 30-46). The immediate moment is the 'rubble' and 'ashes' that followed the Crash of October 1929: 'once I built a railroad, made it run' quotes Isidore from *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?* Waiting in the wings is Roosevelt's New Deal, the programme of fiscal reforms and public investments that in many ways repudiated a hitherto unchecked story of American financial adventure.

Poised between collapse and renewal, Isidore Feldman announces himself as the indefatigable proponent of the myth of New World opportunity. He is a frontier adventurer, 'I have come to the end of the trail in your cornfields' he proclaims. 'It is opening day in America [...] the big sellout' where he and his son can 'trade, traffic, barter, exchange, deal, peddle, purvey' their old clothes and dime-store bric-a-brac. Seizing the stage at a county fair, Isidore unveils '*THE INVENTORY!*', presenting the dubious attractions of 'Things [...] whatchamacallits. Gadgets and gewgaws. Kits and Kaboodle. Stuff' in a torrent of patter that sells the act of commerce itself, as much as the tawdry objects on his cart:

"Diaspora," he called, "America, Midwest, Bible Belt, corn country, county fairgrounds, grandstand. [...] I just blew in on the trade winds [...] and I'm smelling of profit and smelling of loss, and it's heady stuff, heady" [...] He held out a kettle. "All right," he said, "This is from the East. All from the East, where commerce begins. Consumers, consumers, purchasers, folks. I bring the bazaar."

Elkin's language spirals into a rhetoric of desire that separates image from object, and where the object itself is imbued with mythical characteristics: the kettle reifies the march of civilisation from the old East to the new West. To the extent meanwhile that Isidore's fanatical salesmanship is being performed at the 'last stop' – 'an end of the earth, an edge of the world' – it wraps its rhetoric of mythical opportunity into the mythology of the frontier. The 'end of the trail' where he pitches his wares suggests a latter-day stand-in for the wilderness once tamed by the cowboy: 'once his father had seen a film of ranchers in Montana, but they never got that far'. 'Diaspora', in Isidore's tradition the Jewish dispersal after the destruction of the second temple, becomes a proxy for the immigrant movement westwards that populated America's Manifest Destiny and marked its exceptionalism from the atavisms of the old-world East: 'for the first twelve years they fled the minion', a reference to the Eastern European *shtetl* through the number required for Jewish congregational prayer.

In many ways Isidore typifies the American confidence man. He may (or may not) be 'insane' (Leo contemplates the possibility) but his underlying modes of operation are nonetheless, as Lindberg describes, 'radically entangled with the myth of the "New World"'.³² He is part 'pioneer, a frontiersman [...] an American Adam in the wilderness', reinventing himself at America's edge amidst the Depression's disintegrations: 'I tell you', Isidore explains to his son, 'ours is a destiny of emergency. [...] You see me sitting here fulfilling God's will. I bring God's will to the Midwest'.³³ Isidore's ventriloquising of the lofty exceptionalist language of Winthrop, however, and his Franklin-like can-do determination sit alongside the raucous patter of P.T. Barnum, a less wholesome aspect of the confidence man identified by Lindberg as 'the practical making and manipulating of belief without substance for it'.³⁴ Isidore sells his kettle-from-the-East more by aggression than reason, 'buy, damnit, *buy, I say!*'. And it is here, in the simultaneous promotion of America's mythical ideals and in the contradictory destabilisations of history (the Great Crash) and of performance (Isidore's threatening grandiloquence), that Elkin begins to open up the fault-lines that will ultimately define his imprisoned Bad Man, and diagnose contemporary America. When Isidore's inventory of rags becomes the "*Rogues, wooled clouds,*" he roared down the American street', Elkin's subversive spin on the cry of the barker anticipates the moral uncertainties and airy dreams that will attend, and adjudicate upon, his son Leo's career as a post-war entrepreneur.

Elkin's account of how Leo establishes his department store highlights the fine line between opportunity and aggression and links both back to America's foundation (*BM* 119-

³² Lindberg, p.4.

³³ Lindberg, pp.4-5.

³⁴ Lindberg, pp.5,7.

120). It is wartime. Leo, unfit for duty because of the homunculus, is determinedly 'getting rich [...] getting the stock, travelling where the goods were, riding the trains – endless, endless'. He is 'Johnny on the spot [...] Collecting his merchandise. Inventing it' and, critically, 'picking over America' itself. This is in part Feldman as the New Deal pioneer envisaged by Roosevelt, discovering new riches in a mythically-charged American landscape where 'plenty is at our doorstep'.³⁵ Simultaneously, however, Feldman is also the compromised figure of the Crash, obeying 'the rules of a generation of self-seekers'.³⁶ 'The whole country [is] on the take': Feldman is doing deals under the table and a Senator tells him 'we know what you're up to and we don't mind a bit'. The fairy-tale morality of *The Devil and Miss Jones* is disposable says the Senator:

During a war these things have to happen. [...] You sell your wares, and the people on the home front, the factory people and the civil servants and the fillers-in, buy them and it gives them strength. Most people get their strength from the things they own. We have to keep up the balance between guilt and strength to get them to produce.

Feldman regards enterprise itself as a war, full of 'money and blood' (*BM* 104). And consumption during the 1950s was itself, in part, a material response to the lifestyle threat of the Cold War.³⁷ Thus the Senator's endorsement of Feldman's tactics extends beyond the immediate pragmatics of World War Two. It heralds a dispensation where the privileging of ideological superiority infers the promotion of affluence and the accommodation of desire, but where both are predicated on a narrative of success which infers ruthlessness as much as it does opportunity.

A Bad Man's emphasis on compromised myth deepens in an episode where Leo deliberately strategises around the idea of the frontier, the West and their attendant notions of progress (*BM* 201-208). During the 1950s, the question of the frontier moved from wilderness to city as population growth extended urban limits into a mass of newly created suburbs.³⁸ Feldman himself has noticed the commercial attractions of 'The Suburbs: America's New Market Towns' while nonetheless simultaneously worrying over the precariousness of 50s affluence, that 'prosperity was short-lived deception, that at last Red China and The Bomb and Civil Rights and the Russians would take their toll'. The stage is set for a risk, a deal, a

³⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, 4 March 1933.

³⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, 4 March 1933.

³⁷ Consider, for example, Richard M. Nixon, *Six Crises*, p.256. The then Vice-President's 'Kitchen Debate' with Khrushchev in Moscow in July 1959 drew on a model American home to promote America's 'diversity, the right to choose [as] the spice of life'.

³⁸ See, for example: Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

stratagem in which Feldman hedges a perceived instability in the very mythology that has brought his 'fortunes [to] their apogee'. Feldman hires Norman Victman, 'his New York man, his Macy's man', an embodiment of the department store as emblem of American progress ('he had invented the shopping centre, and the suburban branch store'), to realise a Horace Greeley vision of a project more nationally resonant than commerce alone, proclaiming it in a mythologising rhetoric driven by popular cultural references to *The Sound of Music* and Walt Whitman:

America is West, Mr. Victman. The whole world is, the whole universe is.
Dare to dream [...] this is foundations, first principles. Make a wish on the
stars, on the blue horizon. Climb every mountain, Mr. Victman. Pioneers.
O pioneers.

Feldman's language may echo Kennedy's, but his strategy is neither visionary nor even commercially expansive. Rather, he deploys mythical rhetoric as a con trick, to distract and destroy his competitors. 'Don't you *believe* in progress?' asks Victman, shocked, as Feldman reveals his plan is to pretend he is expanding into the new frontier suburbs, thereby tricking his competitors into over-extending themselves before the financial bottom drops out of their frontier dreams. 'I believe in smearing the competition, survival of the fittest, cartel by default', Feldman replies, highlighting a dark corollary to the success myth.

In the end 'the stores had not gone under [...] Red China has not laid a finger on the competition': Feldman is left behind and blames Victman for the failure of his own gamble on America's foundational instincts (*BM* 206). At issue here however is not whether Feldman is ultimately and ironically unable to exploit the culture to which he subscribes. Rather, the suburban frontier episode compounds a multi-faceted, historical exploration of the fragile relationship between myth and material reality. From the Depression years onwards, the back-story of the Feldmans has circled a notion of visionary aspiration and desire-beyond-price which contains an equal likelihood of tawdry worthlessness and disappointment. The mystical associations around Isidore's kettle, Leo's wartime deals, and the ultimate trade on the illusions inside the frontier myth combine into a subversive cultural history of the rise of contemporary affluence.

So perceived, the novel positions itself – and its protagonist – at a point where the affluence that produced the early 60s political consensus is starting to recognise its exposure to compromise. The baby-boomer students who issued the revolutionary Port Huron statement in 1962, for example, echoed Galbraith and spoke of living 'amidst a national celebration of economic prosperity while poverty and deprivation remain an unbreakable way

of life for millions in the “affluent society”.”³⁹ These emerging political circumstances are inferred in Elkin’s novel but his deeper concern is with the contested mythologies that produced them. To that extent, Feldman the emblematic entrepreneur awaits judgement on ‘whether he was in jail for a crime that technically he had not committed’ – that is to say whether he simply adhered to the story of Franklin and Alger – or whether that story always and already risks condemnation for ‘poor citizenship’ (*BM* 23,162). And to that extent too, the grotesque prison which contains the novel’s ‘present-day’ action is both a site of punishment, and a theatre of adjudication where the equivocations over the American myth of success are played out.

4.2.2. An American Prison.

Elkin’s prison is self-consciously allegorical. Its warden, Fisher, is ‘a fisher of bad men’ presiding over ‘a guilt factory’ with dehumanising ‘rules of the community, complex and arbitrary’ (*BM* 12,59,66). But its allegorical impact is not confined solely to the degree to which its familiar architecture of guards and bars configures, what Dougherty describes as, a ‘prison of the mind’ where, as with Robert Stroud’s (Burt Lancaster) journey from Most Wanted to philosophical calm in *The Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962), incarceration is a means for charting the journey of the human soul.⁴⁰ Rather, it becomes a fabulous site for allegorising a close-up examination of contemporary crisis. In this, Fisher’s prison becomes simultaneously a proxy for 60s America as a whole and a space where America confronts the eventual contradictions in its foundational success narrative.

There is a clear sense, first, that the prison extends beyond its ‘narrowing converging walls, crawl spaces and oblique slopes’ to merge into the entire American landscape (*BM* 140). It gives Feldman ‘the impression he moved through zones, seamed places, climbing a latitude – as once [...] driving north from the Florida Keys, he had come all the way up the country to the top of Maine’ (*BM* 140). The prison is not so much a walled precinct as an entire nation, ‘it’s a whole country of penitentiaries we got up there’ says a deputy portentously at the novel’s start as he conducts Feldman to his sentence (*BM* 9).

There is a sense, second, that this all-America prison resonates to a contemporary turbulence. In solitary, the politics of the 60s are conveyed via Leo’s coded dialogue with the

³⁹ ‘The Port Huron Statement, 1962’ in James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p.338.

⁴⁰ David C. Dougherty, ‘Introduction’ to *A Bad Man*, p.xii.

guard who brings him lunch. “How we doing in the cold war?” Feldman asked [...] The guard winked broadly. “I don’t suppose my cousin Dorothy will be taking that trip to Berlin this week”, a likely reference to the stand-off with the Soviets in 1961 (BM 133). The prison TV meanwhile shows urban unrest, ‘white reprisals in Philadelphia for the attack of two fifteen-year-old Negroes on a nun’, a nod towards the increasing importance during the 60s of television in the projection and mediation of national crisis, not least in Vietnam (BM 77).

Elkin consistently blurs the line between isolated, delimited penal colony and the prison as an unlimited space which channels contemporary America itself. Moreover, Elkin blurs the line between whether Leo is being punished as an individual ‘bad man’ or whether America as a whole is somehow sitting in judgement on the myth he inhabits. Feldman’s prison uniform is both a penally ‘orchestrated series of tugs, clings, pulls’ designed to leave him ‘oddly unbalanced’ and a deliberate, but distorted, version of his entrepreneurial daywear ‘not so much a copy of his suit as a clever parody of it’, connected with, and detached from, the external world simultaneously (BM 25).

The prison’s, and indeed the novel’s, connection with national landscape in space and with national turbulence in time is compounded by an explicit connection with the tensions inside national myth in history. The allegorical associations that surround the warden as a fisherman of lost souls extend, via his predilection for set piece sermons and parables, into a distinctively American rhetoric of moral purpose and national destiny. His is the language of the jeremiad, the exhortation towards exemplary behaviour in the service of God that characterised the project of the first settlers. It was a manner of thought that, in the writings of Cotton Mather for example, privileged ‘Good Works, as the *Way* to, yea, as a Part of, the Great Salvation’ and which guardedly accepted, according to Weiss, ‘material success as a sign of the diligent performance of the callings which God assigned to all men’.⁴¹

Thus, for example, Fisher issues a list of rules which recalls the numbered plan for ‘Attaining Moral Perfection’ in Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*.⁴² ‘5. *Work! THIS IS MOST IMPORTANT! [...] Develop a good work ethic*’ – in pursuit of the ordered life – ‘*You will begin to understand how ordinary life is*’ (BM 92). At the same time, Fisher’s language also captures the Puritan recognition that, while material success was to be encouraged, it could also, as Baritz notes, ‘destroy true religion’.⁴³ In a speech which is part revivalist meeting, part political rally (“Two-four-six-eight [...] who do we appreciate?” And the thunderous answer. “*Fisher!*

⁴¹ Cotton Mather and Josephine Ketcham Piercy, *Bonifacius: An Essay To Do Good* (Gainesville, FL: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967), p.38. Weiss, p.27.

⁴² Franklin, *Autobiography*, pp.133-135.

⁴³ Baritz, *City on a Hill*, p.48.

Fisher!”), Fisher tells his prisoners that ‘Civilisation is forms [...] it’s knowing when enough is enough’ before invoking ‘the tongues of Pentecost’ and launching into a hellfire sermon which recalls the Angry God jeremiads of the eighteenth-century New England theologian Jonathan Edwards:

Lord God of hooked scourge and knotted whip, of sidearms and sidecar, of bloodhound and two-way radio [...] lend us Thy anger. Teach us, O God, revulsion. Remind our nostrils of stench and our ears of discord and our eyes of filth. Grant these men a holy arrogance and instil in them the courage to expose all bad men. (*BM* 165-178)

The rhetoric echoes Edwards’ most famous sermon, in Enfield Connecticut in 1741, in which he spoke of ‘the God that holds you over the pit of hell [...] he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast upon the fire’ in a fire-and-brimstone response to his congregation’s perceived departure from the principle of profit-with-restraint originally promoted by the Bay Saints.⁴⁴

Fisher’s rhetoric, together with his seemingly infinitely extensive prison, promote a sense that *A Bad Man’s* diegesis is not confined to the walls of an isolated institution, but resonates across a turbulent contemporary America which is debating its founding principles. As an emblematic entrepreneur, and putative ‘bad man’, therefore, Feldman stands amid a fabulously realised national system which is adjudicating on whether what he represents is a natural consequence of new world aspiration towards material success or whether – following Jonathan Edwards – that same aspiration always and already contained the potential for over-reach, and a threat of existential crisis. That sense of over-reach is further amplified by the novel’s presentation of commerce, the sale and the image-as-commodity as sites of religious devotion in themselves.

4.2.3. Contradictions: The Unsalable Thing.

In the fields of America’s Midwest, Leo’s father Isidore delivers a sermon of his own:

Get what there is and turn it over quick. Dump and dump, mark down and close out. Have specials, my dear. The thing in life is to sell, but if no one will buy, listen, listen, *give* it away! Flee the minion. Be naked. Travel light. Because there will come catastrophe. Every night expect the flood, the earthquake, the fire, and think of the stock ...

⁴⁴ Jonathan Edwards, ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’, quoted in Baritz, *City on a Hill*, p.61.

...Be in a position to lose nothing by it when the bombs fall. But what oh what shall be done with the unsalable thing? (*BM* 38)

It is in part the creed of the confidence man: adapt, 'travel light'. But it also intimates the contradictions inside the success myth. The determination to achieve at all costs – 'the thing in life is to sell' – also contains the determination to create a market for what will not sell on its merits. 'The unsalable thing' paradoxically expresses a process of promoting value in the value-less. A con trick, but also a belief system which is committed to turn even failure into profit, 'every night expect the flood, the earthquake, the fire and think of the stock'.

For Isidore himself, the paradox expresses itself in the ruthless selling of crayons to children, one colour at a time: 'you can't go wrong with white [...] It reflects to the eye all the colours of the solar spectrum' (*BM* 35). And on the country fair stage, it is about evangelising the very theatre of selling more than the objects themselves, 'things as they are. Thingamabobs and thingamajigs, dinguses and whatsits [...] Kits and caboodle. Stuff. Stuff here! [...] What's to be done with the unsaleable thing?' (*BM* 44). And when there are no objects left, the persistent principle of the sale attaches to the salesman himself as his own ultimate commodity. As the county fair ends, Leo asks his father what the 'unsalable thing' is. The exhausted Isidore replies 'It's me' (*BM* 46).

By linking the notion of the 'unsalable thing' – the unmitigated assertion of value – to Isidore and by linking Isidore to the frontier mythology of national expansion, Elkin underlines the degree to which the drive towards success is key to America's foundational story on the one hand, but simultaneously prone to illusion and con on the other. In a macabre twist, Leo tries to sell his father's body when Isidore dies of cancer. After haggling, a doctor offers 'only fifteen dollars' in an ironic commentary on a career of entrepreneurial assertion that has denied, but is terminally forced to confront, its own absence of value (*BM* 46). And in extending the ironies and contradictions contained in Isidore's valorised focus on the 'unsalable thing' to his son Leo – from 30s Depression to post-war affluence, from pitchman's cart to glamorous department store – Elkin highlights a persistent and deepening instability in the success myth as it travels through the American narrative towards the novel's diegetic present.

Leo's department store deploys the same equivocal business model as his father, only on a larger scale. 'Many of his people' are, like Isidore, 'old pitchmen', their 'high pressure elliptic twang' similarly focused on the determined sale: 'anticipate the consequences of desire', says Leo, 'and you'll be rich [...] because desire's built into the human heart' (*BM* 181,104). The inventory is as richly imbued with superficial sensory pleasure, as the 'gadgets

and gewgaws' Isidore used to peddle (*BM* 44). Make-up becomes 'art [...] deep disks of rich rouge, pastel as flesh [...] fine-grained dusting powders like fantastic sand'; belts are 'like coiled snakes in their clear oblong boxes'; ties 'hang [...] thick as a curtain before some gay vaudeville' and lipstick cartridges are 'like golden bullets' (*BM* 188,185).

Critically, however, Leo Feldman's store is more about the act of selling than the objects themselves and *selling* is an act of individual assertion that defines success:

It was thus that he had come to view his merchandise: as possibility, chance turned risk, all of it latent with purchase and profit. But it was dreadful too: [...] Feeling the full responsibility of the risks he took for profit, terrified by the threat of ruin, of there not being customers enough in the city or time enough left in his life to sell it all. (*BM* 187)

In *A Bad Man*, the department store, rather like the pitchman's cart, becomes an emblem for individual drive and affluent desire, unifying both entrepreneur and customer in a narrative of material progress. 'It's as though they had to spend money' comments a prisoner hearing about Leo's sales tactics; in the store itself, Leo luxuriates in 'the very *texture* of his wealth, his soft sissy riches, the unctuous, creamy, dreamy dollars. I am the master of all I purvey' (*BM* 103,185). It is an idea firmly embedded in American popular culture where movies, from *The Devil and Miss Jones* to *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947) valorised both commerce and consumption. And more particularly the idea extends, like Fisher's prison, beyond the walls of the store itself to encompass America.

The language that describes Leo's store projects scale, and myth. Its 'merchandise [is] laid out like a city, patterned, zoned as neighbourhoods'; its 'inventory [is] heavy as the planet'; and in a formulation that links shopping with the advance of the early pioneers, it holds 'a *wilderness* of product' (*BM* 187,189 – italics mine). Elsewhere, running a store is described as an existential battle – 'there was something military about it. [Leo] might have been an officer who had just brought his men through a great battle' – on a 'universal' battlefield: 'that's what I worked for, because the possibilities are unlimited in universal stores. There's everything to sell' (*BM* 104).

In the concept of 'the unsalable thing', in an associated rhetoric which performs the sale and stimulates desire regardless of value, and in the translation of both through recent history between American spaces redolent of frontier stories, Elkin inscribes the seductions and simultaneous instabilities in the success myth as a component in the national narrative. So perceived, he infers a developing crisis in belief that, by the 60s, was also registering in commentary elsewhere. Boorstin, for example, noted an expression of New Nation-*hood* in an American tendency to form 'communities of consumption' where 'never before [in history]

had so many men been united by so many things'.⁴⁵ But he also noted a growing discrepancy between image and value and a growth in 'pseudo-events'. Elsewhere Horowitz identifies a burgeoning trend during the period, from writers like Lewis Mumford, Vance Packard and Michael Harrington, to reinvigorate a debate over the morality of affluence which began in Massachusetts Bay:

From early in the nation's history, writers worried about the moral implications of consumers' self-indulgence and the consequences of changing patterns of comfort and luxury. Opposed to excessive commercialism [...] they proposed instead varying combinations of genuine work, self-control, democracy, public welfare, high culture, meaningful recreation and authentic selfhood.⁴⁶

In Leo's store on the one hand, and in Fisher's prison on the other, Elkin creates two competing images of America and paints in the co-ordinates for a debate over the legitimacy of the American success myth: over the balance between seizing New World opportunity and promoting New World morality. And its epicentre – the situation which effectively places Leo the American entrepreneur at the centre of this debate – is the theatre-of-desire and crisis expression of consumer over-reach that takes over the basement underworld of his store.

4.2.4. A Basement of the Vanities.

Leo's basement is the ostensive reason he is imprisoned. A 'queer open secret', it begins as a site of 'sybaritic indulgence', a carnival of slot machines, sideshow attractions and gaudy merchandise ('gigantic celebrational cakes so painstakingly sculpted their showy frosting could no longer be eaten') designed to attract customers who have lost their sense of purpose: 'listless men' asking after pornographic records, women who are 'faintly aimless, like people killing time at bus stations' (*BM* 255,238,231). It ends as an emporium of unbridled desire and human frailty, arranging abortions for high school girls, dispensing drugs to customers who make 'an uneasy submission of embarrassment to desire': 'like sinners proclaiming their salvation or drug addicts their cure, they spoke of their weaknesses proudly' (*BM* 241,234,240). It is, simultaneously, an expression-verging-on-the-grotesque of affluent consumer culture where '*no one* [is] turned away [...] no matter how exotic and even out of the question the inquiry might be', and of a latter-day continuity with the snake-oil salesmen and confidence men who traded at the historic frontier (*BM* 239).

⁴⁵ Boorstin, *The Democratic Experience*, p.90.

⁴⁶ Horowitz, p.2.

Exactly why Feldman is arrested is never made explicit. He sees himself as simply doing favours: 'Feldman's the name, favours the game [...] I never took a penny' (*BM* 18,15). The warden's wife accuses him of doing 'all those terrible things for people' (*BM* 152). The puritanical warden simply regards him as a 'bad clown' and 'wicked fool' for whom punishment is inevitable, 'when I want you to confess I'll have you beaten up and you'll confess' (*BM* 15-16). And while abortion in the U.S. was effectively illegal until 1973, and pushing drugs has not ceased to be a crime, the lack of precise penal cause-and-effect, is salient. Its absence opens up a question as to the sustainability of definitive (moral) judgements, both in the overall contest between the novel's two historical narratives – opportunity and puritan reserve, pitchman and preacher – and here, in Feldman's basement, in the contemporary confusion over the governance of desire.

The basement is described as 'holy chthonic ground' and the 'true pulse, perhaps, of the economy itself' (*BM* 230,233). It is a site of murky subterranean wants and needs on the one hand, and yet is somehow sanctified on the other. And that moral ambiguity is in turn, Elkin suggests, characteristic of the contemporary climate. It is what attracts the 'listless' and the 'aimless'. It shapes the 'unsalable things' that are the basement's logical extensions of the pitchman's trade in simulacra: the sex, abortions and pills that commodify the relief of anxiety. 'It was as if their needs had been subverted, and they had now the aspect of people who knew they had been had but could not help themselves' (*BM* 234).

So perceived, the basement resonates beyond the limits of its nominal boundaries to become an emblem for an entire culture in crisis. It is, on the one hand, an expression of Leo's 'way of bearing down on the world', a vector for self-assertion where Leo can 'wheel and deal in ultimate products' and defy the 'measly conspiracy of the civilized that puts safety before profit' (*BM* 242,246). But it is also a site, on the other hand, where human desire and excess, 'the sins subsumed in the body's joy', can be realised while paying lip service to the rules of social decorum: Leo's transactions offer his customers 'a ritual, a ceremonial fiction, as though their troubles and their solutions needed channels and red tape to legitimise them' (*BM* 248).

The contemporary political implications of this are thrown into relief by Leo's most completely realised basement customer (*BM* 249-254). The man wears an American flag and a symbol of a revolutionary minuteman on his lapel. He fears 'the nationhood is being threatened':

Rioters. Looting. So-called civil rights [...] Kennedy's assassination. A signal. Their call to arms [...] Pervasive moral collapse [...] The debilitating effect of modern music: jungle rhythms, chaos. Basement tactics of the so-called Black Muslims. Trouble in so-called Asia.

The list breathlessly summarises many of the tensions that would dog 60s American life, albeit expressed through a silent majority paranoia that fears post-Kennedy turbulence. ‘*Wake up America!*’ the customer complains, ‘*Oh, for God’s sake, wake up before it’s too late*’. Where other basement customers come looking to indulge and legitimise private needs and desires, this customer connects and then amplifies their discrete anxieties into an emerging sense of national disorientation. The basement is suddenly the centre of a divisive contemporary politics, as much as it is already equivocating between the narratives of material success and moral caution.

Critical here is Leo’s response. The customer’s paranoia becomes the opportunity for another sale. ‘You want guns. And Ammo’ Leo convinces him, ‘I can equip an outfit of two hundred men and put them in the field for forty thousand dollars’. And part of the pitch is a casual appropriation of American revolutionary history and national mythology: ‘*Arm, goddam it! The so-called British are coming [...] Wake up, American! Force! How much money you got?*’. The collision of ideas here is complex, and unresolved. Pursuing the sale involves suspending moral judgements and political preferences. Then again, it promotes a continuity with a historical American narrative as a basis for tackling the anxieties of the present. But then again still, it is also an ‘unsalable thing’, a con which asserts the customer’s wants and needs can be alleviated by material acquisition and legitimised by mythical precedent: ‘seduction’ Leo reflects, ‘was routine; yielding was; everyone had a yes to spend and spent it. And there was about them all some soft, run-to-fat quality not of knowledge but of consent and peace, the puffy eyes of the heart’.

The question Leo’s basement seems to raise is not *whether* commerce – the *seduction*, the *transaction* – can *actually* solve problems, individual or political. It is the *assumption* it can. Leo is happy to self-promote by exploiting the assumptions of disorientated customers who believe their own success in life resides in desires whose satisfaction can be bought. More simply perhaps, the myth of success combines with an illusory sense of well-being to promote a sense of trajectory during a period of turbulence and aimlessness, even if that trajectory is predicated on dark, ‘chthonic’ and morally questionable desires.

4.2.5. Contesting Systems.

I have argued that *A Bad Man* sets up a tension between two mythical traditions. On one side the myth of success, embodied in the salesman and his pitchman’s trade in desire. On the other side the tradition of moral caution, allied to founding notions of exceptionalism.

Leo's basement becomes the ontological zone where these two notions collide: it is a site of crisis, redolent with the periodic instabilities in American culture, where dark desires are transformed into narratives of putative purpose while retaining a patina of moral justification and historical legitimacy. It is a zone where modern America equivocates over its historical relationship with wealth and affluence and civilisation and leadership.

It is an issue that became increasingly intense as the 60s entered the 70s. In his 1968 acceptance speech, for example, Nixon tried to link wealth and social responsibility in an attempt to reconcile his Republican base with Kennedy/Johnson progressives. 'There is more wealth in America today' he said, 'than in any nation in the world', but historically 'America stood for something more powerful than military strength or economic wealth' and so his administration would be about providing 'for all those who cannot help themselves'.⁴⁷ But, as Horovitz has identified, the Nixon Years also saw an intensification in the argument that 'the United States, once held together by a covenant or social compact, had become a nation of self-seeking individuals who sought pleasure, not God'.⁴⁸

To that extent, *A Bad Man* is already anticipating the anxieties that became widespread in America during the recession of the early 70s. But to that extent too, it also registers the contestations and confusions whose irresolvability would drive that later collapse in economic and cultural self-confidence. The novel's site for this is, ironically, the very prison where Fisher presides over a tradition of moral exceptionalism, 'virtue is system, honour is order. God is design, grace is a covenant', but where that tradition can ultimately be neither confident of its legitimacy, nor entirely capable of pursuing its authority (*BM* 64). The prison becomes a zone of indeterminacy, echoing to 'a treadmill rhythm of opposing impulses' (*BM* 221).

A mood of forensic equivocation is established in the novel's opening. A gun-toting deputy bursts into Leo's office:

"Reach, the jig is up Feldman" [...]

"You've got me covered," Feldman admitted.

Miss Lane looked from one to the other. "What is this?" she demanded.

"It's the jig," Feldman explained. "It's up." (*BM* 1)

The comedy betrays a cluster of 'opposing impulses'. The language is a clear pastiche of hardboiled gangster movies like *White Heat* (1949) and, as such, locates the story inside a Hollywood narrative of cause-and-effect crime and retribution, where the fact of arrest short-

⁴⁷ Richard M. Nixon, 8 August 1968.

⁴⁸ Horovitz, p.208.

circuits to the verdict itself, 'he was sentenced to a year in the penitentiary' (*BM* 1). At the same time, the comic self-consciousness is a metafictional intervention which draws attention to its narrative construction and consequently destabilises its assertion of forensic authority. The reader is immediately drawn into a restless circularity where outcomes are complicated even as they are intimated. And this circularity in systems of judgement persists in the novel, continually problematizing, and rendering uneasy, its debate over systems of mythical belief.

At issue here are not simply the protestations of the convicted man who forever declares his innocence: 'It was the machine's mistake' (*BM* 15). Nor is it the aspect of Warden Fisher that defaults to a predictable legal regime: 'We have the laws and the rules, don't you see?' (*BM* 64). Nor indeed is it the pragmatism whereby Leo is prepared to connive at authority: 'I'll give him words. He wants guilt? Let there be guilt' (*BM* 14). At issue rather is the degree to which each of these familiar penal narratives is diverted, and subverted, by the competing mythical trajectories proposed by the novels' 'two Americas'. More simply, expectations are destabilised in the gap between two systems of belief which both seek to propel the national idea.

Consider first the *system* performed by Warden Fisher: officious and capricious bureaucrat in charge of a 'vicious system' on the one hand, fisher of lost souls on the other (*BM* 75). His regime combines, as previously noted, the jeremiads of the Great Awakening, the success manuals that extended from Franklin's *Autobiography* to the Gilded Age novels of Horatio Alger, and the relentless 'vicious plodding sequiturs' of industrial administration:

You play ball with us and we'll play ball with you [...] I don't care about your mind, and I promise no-one will lay a finger on your soul [...] Do the routines. Learn to think about your laundry. Keep your cell clean [...] Learn a trade. Try out for the teams. Pray for the condemned. (*BM* 52,16)

Fisher's proposition is that life is 'ordinary' and that Leo should not confuse material success with a more spiritual notion of a meaningful existence: 'the most difficult thing' Fisher's rules state, 'is the problem of sharpening your work ethic in the absence of the profit motive' (*BM* 92). And the sense that this is somehow true to America's foundational ideas is dramatized in sermons which repudiate the profiteer and the confidence man, 'the bondsman and the bailee', advocate scrutiny over commerce, 'Don't let them out of your sight [...] watch in the foundry, in the print shop – *in the canteen* [...] Sin leaves clues', and locate the pursuit of 'Virtue, virtue, virtue' in the collective exercise of exceptionalism:

I am calling on the infusion of the sacerdotal spirit. I need inquisitors' hearts! You must be *malleus maleficarum*, hammers of witches, punishers

and pummelers in God's long cause [...] Despoil, confiscate, make citizen's arrests. (BM 165-178)

This moral absolutism is destabilised even as it is enunciated. First in Elkin's cascade of references. The allusion to the Salem witch trials of the 1690s speaks in and of itself to hysteria and to fanatical over-reach. Second there is comedy. The language's sheer energy tumbles over into a religious gobble-di-gook without shape or connection: 'I give you carte-blanche souls. Charge even the dead. *Yes!* Let us have exhumations [...] flagellate, spank [...] exorcise the *lamiae*, rout the *mascae*, bury the *incubi*. Ignite the dark conventicle'. And third, there is bathos. Fisher's attempt to find a contemporary analogue for the scrutiny of Edwards' 'Angry God' over-eggs the mundane: 'Lord God of hooked scourge and knotted whip, of sidearms and sidecar. Of bloodhound and two-way radio, vigilant Good of good neighbourhoods and locked Heaven – lends us Thy anger'.

More emphatically however there is a destabilising relativism in Fisher's companion speech to his blood-and-thunder sermon. In '*The Parable of the Shoo-in*', the warden describes a diligent employee being considered for promotion to his company board (BM 166–172). Asked for references he supplies enthusiastic letters from 'men at the head of *the biggest companies in America*', much to the surprised delight of his bosses. On closer examination however the letters which praise the candidate's 'good humour' on the one hand are also impressed with his 'seriousness of purpose' on the other. Soon '*all* the board members began to discover inconsistencies' and decide 'the candidate is devious'. Denying him the position for which he was a shoo-in, the chairman explains that 'a man should be fixed [...] a certain firmness was lacking'. So far, so consistent with the absolutism of Fisher's sermon or the prudent diligence of Franklin. But then the story changes. The candidate asserts his adaptability – 'what you call character is the mere obstinacy of the self [...] One adjusts his humanity to the humanity of others' – stays and then rises through the company: 'he got everybody's job [...] thousands are employed. [The company] pays enormous taxes to the government, and the government uses the money to build ships and planes that defend us all'.

For Fisher the parable's ostensive lesson is the virtue of flexibility. But set alongside the zealotry of his sermon it also contests notions of unshakeable moral conviction. It is as if the system Fisher ventriloquises cannot, in various ways, avoid equivocation and relativism, not least when 'ships and planes', national power, are at stake.

Equivocation also extends to the second system of belief. Leo's credo of the successful salesman is both promoted and repudiated by a prison whose smooth running relies on the satisfaction of desire as much as an adherence to rules. Given responsibility for the

prison shop, for example, Feldman reverts to being his father's son (*BM* 95-110). Hiding the 'famous kinds' of products and allowing 'those he had never heard of to remain', Feldman convinces his customers to purchase 'unsalable things':

Feldman sold things in half-dozens that had never been sold before at all. He pushed the number four pencils, and when the men discovered that these produced unsatisfactory, almost invisible lines, he sold them ink in which they could dip their pencils.

In the shop, the America of the basement and the America of the prison collide. It is a site, on the one hand, where success lies in Leo's labyrinthine acts of persuasion that convince one inmate a mauve drink that 'tastes like bubble gum' is an alternative to Coke: 'I try to see how far I can take a customer, if I can wrap him in the chain'. On the other hand, it is a site of moral judgement. Fisher condemns Leo to solitary 'for forcing items on men they did not need'. Ultimately however the sale and the moral order have to settle into an uneasy accommodation. After solitary, 'Feldman, behaving, sold his quota of toothpaste and shaving articles and filter-tip cigarettes in the canteen – no more, no less – and tried to feel the virtue that is the reward of the routinized life' (*BM* 138).

The sense of two systems tussling, and never confidently resolving, persists through increasingly bizarre fabulations. Locked in solitary and taunted by his homunculus, Feldman cannot find co-ordinates to guide his own conscience: 'he marvelled at his spinning moods, his barber-pole soul [...] he found himself praying. "Give me back constancy," he prayed, "make me monolithic, fix my flux and let me consolidate"' (*BM* 130,131). In a subsequent episode, Feldman is invited by the Warden to a post-solitary party and is confronted by the 'odour of ordinance', a parade of the forces of social obedience (*BM* 139-161). There are strange civil servants – one calls himself a 'Chargé de Disease' – and 'enormous varieties of cophood [...] sheriffs and marshals and constables and private detectives'. The party conversation debates criminality ('There's only one crime [...] it's theft') and a decline in public morals ('When was the golden age of obedience in this country?') and Fisher channels both into a religious judgement on Feldman the entrepreneur:

It's way of life against way of life with me, Feldman. I show you alternatives to wholesale and retail. I push past your poetics, your metaphors of merchandise, and scorn the emptiness of your *caveat emptor*.

In a staged tableau, somewhere between morality play and film noir, Feldman is seduced by a femme fatale in a compromising effort, it appears, to confront him with his mercantile failings. The woman turns out to be the Warden's wife and Fisher locks Feldman in the death chamber to contemplate his crimes in the presence of the Electric Chair. What

follows however is a vertiginous dismantling of the very system of ordinance the party appeared designed to promote in the first place. On the one hand, Feldman 'felt compelled to offer the warden a confession'; on the other, Feldman debates whether his only crime is that the Warden hates him ('It was very puzzling') and whether therefore his punishment is arbitrary, 'sure, power liked to play by the rules [...] it changed its mind. It killed you with its alternating current'.

As if to emphasise the vertiginous circularities of judgement inside Warden Fisher's American Prison, Feldman, alone in the death chamber, contemplates the 'alternating currents' that might yet combine to eliminate him. Was he a bad citizen? 'He had never hated Communists' (BM 161). Had he failed to realise some higher calling? He calls on a variety of deities to 'blast and cream [his unnamed accusers] wreck their plans, rip them for Feldman' (BM 163). Significantly however his list of saviours lists the 'Almighty Dollar' alongside 'dear Jesus and Buddha, Jehovah and Love, Mind, Spirit and Guts' in an echo of Fisher's sermons where blood-and-fire religiosity tussled with commercial relativism. And significantly these 'alternating currents' cannot finally resolve. Leo sits in the electric chair in the sure knowledge 'that it was on all right' and, after a series of near comic contortions, positions himself to apply the juice:

He lived.

This too, he thought. I'm a lousy conductor. (BM 164)

4.2.6 Imprecise Verdicts and a Crisis to Come.

From contemporary prison to Depression-era Midwest, *A Bad Man* circles through time and an American geography charged with history, and mythology. From salesman-entrepreneur to sacerdotal-custodian, the text vacillates inside unresolved and unstable systems of individual assertion and collective belief. And in the final chapter, Elkin translates that climate of prevailing volatility into an expression of impending crisis.

In a novel which has spent much of its time debating issues of guilt and innocence and the morality of different routes to success, it is significant that the only actual *trial* occurs right at the end, just before Feldman is scheduled for release (BM 278-308). The trial is set up as a form of narrative and societal resolution, 'as though [Feldman's] life had been a mystery or detective story, and now [...] he was to be regaled with solutions, satisfy curiosity in a last sumptuous feast of truth'. There are nominal rules of procedure, 'we make up our mind on

the evidence'. And there is a method of punishment: an inmate stands by to drive the homunculus into Feldman's heart.

The co-ordinates are in place, it seems, for a process of closure: the novel's excursions and equivocations will finally cohere into an institutional determination on the myth of success and marketing of desire that Feldman has embodied and which Warden Fisher's performances of reserve have largely contested. To the extent, however, that a trial promotes the notion, not least a metafictional one, of determined outcome, its conduct and apparent verdict serve only to promote a contrary notion that the instabilities over which it purports to adjudicate are spiralling out of control. In this, Elkin deploys parody and over-emphasises a perfunctoriness of resolution so as to suggest that what began as a debate over national values has now descended into a crisis of violent difference, and that crisis is spreading, not just through the prison but into society beyond.

Elkin returns, for the 'kangaroo court', to the notion that there are barely any walls between Fisher's jail and the rest of America. The 'posse' that collects Feldman are no longer inmates but a 'delegation [...] of caucused principle, passionate as the decision of revolutionaries in the street'. Leo is to be tried in his business suit rather than his prison uniform. The proceedings themselves resemble a student sit-in, as some prisoners pull up cots and fall asleep and others serve meals. Elkin blurs the line between whether this will be a cell-block lynching, or some form of public show trial, 'a ceremony of denouncement, a process of judgement'. Feldman is on trial it is suggested before the nation itself, his jury are 'like sleepless tenants before their apartment buildings on a hot night'.

The trial itself however begins as an elaborate parody as if to emphasise the ambiguities that surround both Feldman's business practices, and the authority of his accusers. Witnesses cite gobble-di-gook rules to condemn Feldman before he has even testified: 'It is unconstitutional' says one, 'inadmissible for evidence to be garnered from statements made in trances, stupors, comas, deliriums, tongues and dreams'. Feldman replies with bizarre, ad hoc collections of parodic precedents: 'the notorious Lindbergh case of 19 and 32 and the famous *cherchez la femme* precedent in the Scopes trial of 1955, only Justice William Jennings Darrow abstaining'. The trial 'swarmed about [Feldman], meaningless as the random arc of flies'. Indeed, so pronounced and centrifugal are the absurdities and irresolvabilities, their effect, set alongside the proceeding's nominal forensic ambition, is to heighten the sense of the perfunctory in the novel's closure, and to simultaneously deepen a sense of the ultimately arbitrary in what is advertised as a moral determination. What begins as a hearing-of-fact with a 'fresh democratic air' descends into a violent crisis of irresolution.

The context for this is a final encounter between Fisher and Feldman in which both rhetoricise elaborate, heightened versions of their contrasting postures as if one, or other, closing presentation will consolidate the jury's verdict. Fisher is terse and absolute, 'I'm Warden Fisher, the fisher of bad men. I make the rules, what happens here happens because I make it happen'. Feldman, in response, tells another rags-to-riches story, a convoluted tale of two post-war orphans whose friendship survives their commercial competition. One, Feldman himself, becomes wealthy, 'the war, the seller's market and all', while doing little to alleviate the struggles of the other, Leonard Dedman, who 'never had a talent for money'. The story meanders and never comes to verdict. Instead Warden Fisher summarily orders the mob to attack, and drive the homunculus into Feldman's heart.

The final moments of *A Bad Man* imagine the ultimate desperation in a culture which cannot resolve the uneasiness it feels amid the contradictions inside its core mythologies. Both men remain convinced of their legitimacy. 'Why, I *am* innocent' is Feldman's final thought 'as they beat him. And indeed he felt so'. Fisher asserts his moral authority even as he orders a lynching. The sudden recourse to a form of communal violence as the perfunctory solution to the men's duel of beliefs suggests that a debate that might otherwise continue to circle, and indeed has circled through the texture of the novel, has now reached the end of tolerance and collapsed instead into a crisis of entrenchment.

The sombre fall-out from *A Bad Man*, published in 1967, is that the contradictions inside the success myth and the contemporary debate over affluence risked eventuating in violence. 1968 would be characterised by violence across America. By 1976, however, it was not only social conflict Elkin contemplated but a potentially terminal crisis in American capitalism itself.

4.3. The Franchiser.

It is the mid-1970s. Richard Nixon has resigned. North Vietnam has driven the last Americans from Saigon. And the U.S. is in recession. Nixon's economic policies have effectively ended the Bretton-Woods agreement that underpinned economic growth since the War; the price of oil is rising; the stock market has crashed; inflation by 1975 is at 12%, and unemployment is 9%, a post-war high. And, in *The Franchiser*, Elkin offers an image of systemic entropy: 'it was the expanding universe here. America's molecules drifting away from each other like a blown balloon, like heat rising, the mysterious physical laws gone public' (TF 306).

Where *A Bad Man* expressed America's increasing unease with a narrative of success predicated on affluence and desire, *The Franchiser* projects a near terminal vision of an America where mythological tensions are no longer suspended but are consuming its very centre. Protagonist Ben Flesh, trader in consumer franchises, is succumbing to multiple sclerosis. Before he is finally strapped into a wheelchair he is making one last road-trip to assert himself, and his version of the success myth, onto America. His America however is fragmenting: beset by power outages, declining in consumer and national confidence, tumbling towards inertia. And in his portrait of a businessman who perceives himself to be the guiding impulse of the American nervous system – but whose own system is simultaneously and ironically demyelinating – Elkin anatomises the contested mythologies that have prompted a national political and existential crisis.

Flesh aspires to 'something nobler and more spiritual even than enough cash; something no less than empire itself – to be the man who made America look like America, who made America famous' (TF 262). But by exposing the fragility of Flesh's popular cultural illusions and by highlighting the precariousness of the myth of opportunity in which he has invested – the franchise as foundational act of self-assertion – Elkin identifies the fault-lines in a national idea that has placed too much faith perhaps in Horatio Alger, and in the transformative power of affluence. And by drawing those fault-lines towards a particular historical moment – 1975, the eve of the Bicentennial self-examination – Elkin imagines the 'mysterious physical laws' that were eroding national self-belief and that, in the more explicit cultural commentaries of Daniel Bell and Christopher Lasch for example, were identified as destabilising the national body politic. *The Franchiser's* first chapter may end by promising 'a beautiful day in the United States of America' but by the novel's structural centre, in the darkness of Columbus Nebraska at the geographical heart of the Union, 'America has everywhere failed, the power broken down!' (TF 5,153).

4.3.1. Interest Rates and Franchises.

Elkin's inscription of crisis in *The Franchiser* is multi-layered and structurally complex. It is partly generational, located in Ben Flesh's deteriorating relationship with his adoptive family, the Finsbergs, whose inherited duty it is to underwrite his commercial career. It is partly pathological: the Finsbergs, eighteen genetically-vulnerable twins and triplets are, like Ben himself, dying out, succumbing to bizarre diseases and grotesque accidents. It is partly geographical: Ben travels across America in the Cadillac he calls home like some latter-day

pioneer, but ends up closing rather than opening the businesses that represent his personal frontier of opportunity. And the sense of systems breaking down is expressed through the novel's chronological structure, a series of concentric timeframes, bracketed by the novel's opening and closing chapters, which channel a version of the American Century into an instant just before inertia and death.

Underpinning this complexity however are two consistent points-of-return, taken from the real world of business, which connect the novel's intertwined images of decline with the political specificities of a contemporary moment. And both of them, the Prime Interest Rate and the American innovation of the franchised business, are proxies for a narrative of success which is now, in the mid-70s, reversing.

The Prime Interest Rate first, whose fluctuations percolate through Elkin's prose: 'we dance to the prime interest rate itself' (*TF* 62). Ben is able to develop a franchise business thanks to a deathbed bequest from his father's former business partner Julius Finsberg who guarantees that his family will always underwrite Ben's loans at 'the rate of interest a bank charges its best customers' (*TF* 30). The narrative charts the bank rate from a post-war low of 1.45% to the point in the summer of 1960 where 'the prime rate on four-to-six-month paper was 3.85 per cent' and Ben opens his Colonel Sanders franchise, to the point during the mid-70s recession when rates were at 6.75% and rising (*TF* 92). By 1975 when Flesh opens his last franchise, a Travel Inn which is 'his most important venture', rates are into double figures (*TF* 300). Not only that, but Ben's ultimate business plan is predicated on attracting guests who are driving across country during a climate of declining affluence: 'that was before the Yom Kippur war, that was before the oil embargo, that was before the energy crisis, that was before the 55-mile-an-hour speed limit had been imposed nationwide' (*TF* 302). Thus, at its most straightforward, Elkin's story is grounded in the economic history of a financial system which had overspent on Vietnam and on Great Society reforms, which was losing jobs overseas, and which had little in reserve to counter the OPEC oil embargo which sought in part to punish America's support of Israel. More simply perhaps, the movements in the Prime Interest Rate graph the transformation in a culture which once had easy access to plenty, but no longer.

The franchise, however, is the novel's dominant motif. 'Franchising' Ray Croc founder of McDonald's is quoted as saying, 'has become an updated version of the American Dream'.⁴⁹ And to that extent Elkin particularises the franchise as an articulation of the American success narrative. But to that extent too, the particular stipulations of the

⁴⁹ Quoted in Thomas S. Dicke, *Franchising in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p.x.

franchising system also allow Elkin to explore the contradictions inside, and ultimate fragility of that narrative.

By the mid-60s, there were 350,000 outlets in the U.S. franchising some 1,200 products and services, including Ben Flish's Fred Astaire Dance Studio, Colonel Sanders and Mister Softee. Their attraction as a business idea was threefold. First, they allowed manufacturers to distribute products and originators to market ideas with limited investment and minimal risk; 'there are rules Ben. You have to buy everything from the company' one of the Finsbergs tells Ben as he contemplates his first purchase, a Howard Johnson's (TF 50). Second, franchises allowed individuals access to (a form of) commercial independence without the risks or demands of innovation. American ideas could be acquired off-the-shelf: Ben is 'hiding behind others' expertise, paying them for their names' (TF 319). And third, the franchise appeared to democratise consumption. As Boorstin observes, the 'haphazard personal enterprise' of local supply and demand was displaced by 'standardised, market-tested, nationally advertised brands', repeatable and reliable purchasing represented a consumerist version of national inclusiveness: 'a man of franchise' Ben believes is 'a true democrat who would make Bar Harbour, Maine look like Chicago, who would quell distinction, obliterate difference, who would common-denominate until Americans recognise that it was America everywhere' (TF 164).⁵⁰

The notion that the franchise can homogenise America, that in Ben's estimation all Americans can consequently aspire to and consume one collective experience, elevates a business model into a mythic, national idea: the franchise as 'some screwy version of Manifest Destiny' (TF 68). At the same time, the grandiloquence of the notion – the comic image of an American landscape achieving its 'ultimate homogeneity [and] final monolithism' in a receding frontier of golden arches – simultaneously betrays the precariousness of its mythic ambitions (TF 245). It is a notion that Elkin unpacks in a series of set-piece fabulations, involving Colonel Sanders.

The first is in the late summer of 1960. Ben is launching his KFC in a New York retail park and is, bizarrely, addressing the crowd from inside the giant red and white bucket on the roof. His rhetoric has a religious intensity and the bucket becomes a pulpit hovering above 'hallowed American ground of the twentieth century' (TF 92-104). The sermon includes a shaggy-dog parable about a naive countryman who travels to the city to visit his father in hospital and who acquires along the way '*a proper knowledge of accessory*', of franchised goods and services. It culminates in a richly allusive version of a Jewish blessing: 'I am Benny in

⁵⁰ Boorstin, *The Democratic Experience*, p.433.

the Bucket, the spirit of Bernie Baruch upon me. *Baruch. Atoh. Adonai*. Bless this enterprise, oh, Lord. *Babless* it'. The folksy wisdom, the cross-cultural echo of the foundational notion of America as God's country, the reconciliation of both into Bernard Baruch, financier, philanthropist and one of the architects of Roosevelt's New Deal; the rhetorical intensities project an excited connection between the franchise and a multivalent American narrative. More particularly the connection extends into contemporary politics and popular culture.

The same retail park, it appears, has entertained Nixon and Kennedy on their 1960 campaign trail, 'the media. Dave Binkley up close. Cronkite standing. The truth squads of both parties, shadow cabinets'. In Ben's escalating vision of his franchise as the epicentre of a cluster of political postures, mythical ideas and popular iconographies, the retail park is transformed into a site of national reverence – 'One day it will be remembered like [...] some Gettysburg of the rhetorical' – and the name behind the franchise itself is transformed from trademark to national patron saint:

It's Colonel Sanders who should be here today! The Colonel himself in his blinding whites. Standing where I stand tossing chicken parts like lollies from a float. Not Ben Flesh in the flesh, but *him*. No surrogate – not after Nixon, not after Kennedy. *Him! His State of the Union!*

On the one hand, this episode is a grandiloquent statement about the franchise's perceived position in a national narrative of opportunity and power: Col Sanders for President. On the other hand, it foregrounds the fragility of the franchise narrative's contradictions. It is not simply the bathos of being ultimately and comically about selling 'chicken parts': Ben prays for *Adonai* to 'inscribe everywhere upon the universal palate a taste for the Colonel's white meat and dark'. Rather, the episode is suspended inside a network of tonal and contextual associations which pronounce a deeper ambivalence about the stability of national myth.

The mention of Kennedy and of Flesh himself watching from on high produces a queasy observation driven, as it were, by collective national memory: 'I wondered if he could see me in the bucket. What about the Secret Service guys? [...] ASSASSIN POPS CANDIDATE FROM FRIED CHICKEN AERIE!'. The baleful comedy cannot avoid inferring the social instabilities that followed a decade of political murders and shootings. But a still deeper instability perhaps is contained in the fact that the reader has met Ben's patron saint, Colonel Sanders, before.

In an earlier episode, in the late 1950s, Ben has run into the Colonel in a New York park, or at least into a man pretending to be the Colonel. Ben is 'hypnotised by a trade mark', drawn into an encounter which betokens, by turns, the seductiveness of an aspirational vision and the easy conspiracy of shared purpose (*TF* 75-92). The Colonel is portrayed in near

religious terms: his suit is 'white of presence like limelight burning on a stag'; on shaking hands 'Flesh opened his jaws wide as he could and shoved as much of the man's hand inside his mouth as possible' in a grotesque version of kissing the pontiff's ring. At the same time, the Colonel is a performer, a piece of national property somewhere between celebrity and politician; Flesh intervenes like a Presidential Secret Service man – 'He put his hand in his overcoat. The man backed off' – when a crowd jostles for a photograph.

It is partly an episode about the power of the image. In one clear sense the Colonel imitator is promoting himself on the back of a borrowed, or *franchised*, celebrity. Over an elegant lunch – *this* Colonel prefers '*bouillabaisse*' to demotic buckets of chicken – the imitator explains the construction of his 'footlight being, [his] proscenium presence': 'The cartoon features? Air-brushed. My flush? Pancake powder [...] Roosevelt never stood and Lenin and Trotsky turned a moustache and a beard into history [...] Image'. We are in a dispensation where the *image* of the Colonel, itself already detached from an original individual and even an original product, becomes a currency in itself, a simulacrum. As the imitator says: 'I was a sight for sore eyes. As all celebrity is. I enhance the resemblance. I enhance my life. I enhance everybody's life'.

Ben's encounter with, and reverence for, the faux-Colonel is, in Boorstin's terms, an emblematic 'pseudo-event'. To the extent therefore that the notion of the franchise contains a proxy notion of success predicated on the promulgation of an image which itself may already been detached from substance, it speaks to a latter-day version of the narrative of achievement which, having loosed its moorings, is always and already unstable. 'I'll be damned [...] if I ever buy another bucket', says the man in the crowd around the Colonel whom Ben blocks from taking a picture, 'Yeah, we've lost you to Steak'n Shake' Ben replies as if to register the fickle instabilities in a market where image-exchange-value has displaced use-value.

Elkin's riffing on Colonel Sanders transforms the American franchise from a business strategy into a complex vehicle for a volatile range of cultural ideas. Reified by Ben Flesh, even a fast-food outlet becomes 'hallowed ground', a point-of-contact with American history, foundational ideals and the embodiment of both in revered entrepreneurs. So perceived, the novel's franchises – the points-of-return which link Ben's Colonel Sanders outlet with his One Hour Martinizing, his Mister Softee with his perceived crowning glory, the Travel Inn – combine into create an unstable national landscape. As an idea which has colonised 'the packed masonry of [American] states' with, among others, its 'immense sunburst of [Holiday Inn] green and yellow sign', it already oscillates between realising a myth of opportunity and

progress, and projecting a climate of illusion (TF 3). A latter-day notion of Manifest Destiny where, as Boorstin notes, 'the American landscape [becomes] a world of product clichés'.⁵¹

In itself therefore the notion of the franchise always and already contains a notion of incipient crisis, of value promoted and yet ultimately destabilised as little more than appearance. And in the experience of the franchiser himself, Elkin transforms the franchise into an expression of an entire America whose cherished systems are disintegrating.

4.3.2 The Entrepreneur of the Nixon Years.

Over cigars, the faux Colonel Sanders offers Ben some advice. 'You got about as much image as a shoe salesman' the Colonel says, 'You could buy up all the franchises in the world, but you ain't got the face for a billboard [...] You're fading on me' (TF 82). The comment locates Ben's relation to his franchises as an attempt to bypass his own lack of distinction by profiting from the distinctive image of others. But to the extent that the franchise-system is, in turn, Ben's point-of-access to the national myth of success, the comment underlines too a notion of systemic instability: Ben's career lacks substance even before it begins.

The critical point here is that Elkin positions Ben Flesh ('Ben' in Hebrew 'son of' flesh) as a portmanteau figure at a focal-point of mythical contestation. He is a man of few qualities ('nothing at all he did better than others') who nonetheless seeks to channel the grand narrative of opportunity (TF 48). And by exploring the gap between the two, *The Franchiser* critiques a system of national belief which has over-reached itself. The intrinsic instability in the franchise which Elkin has identified becomes, in its eager promotion by the 'fading' Ben Flesh, the index to a broader process of decline.

Throughout the novel, Ben attaches himself to ideas of America's historical greatness and foundational ambitions. 'Forbes would not have heard of him, Fortune wouldn't', but to the extent that Ben carries around mental images of 'all those gray sideburned gents of razor resolution', and to the extent that he mythologises their stories – 'all the high echelon raided, that cadre of the corporate kidnapped swooped down upon like God-marked Greeks' – he nonetheless perceives himself as part of, and heir to, a heroic tradition of commercial dynamism which stretches back to the post-bellum nineteenth century (TF 14-15). The innovators who have subsequently become global trademarks, who propelled America's corporate exceptionalism, are as 'real to him as film stars or the leaders of his country [...] he believed in a Mr Westinghouse. Remington, Maytag, Amana and the Smith Brothers' (TF 46).

⁵¹ Boorstin, *The Democratic Experience*, p.433.

And at the Wharton School of Business, he daydreams about adding his name to his classmates' roll call of American Century enterprise:

"Boeing."

"Here, sir." [...]

Carling. Crane. Culligan. Disney. Dow. Du Pont. Elgin. Fedders.

"Flesh" [...]

"What? Oh. Yes. Here, sir. Yes, sir. Present". (TF 48-9)

In one clear sense therefore Ben's story is driven by a compulsion to join those Americans whose very names have come to define the nation itself. He likens himself, at one point, to a restless early settler pushing away at the frontier, 'Itchfoot the Peddler, Westward the Itinerant, Footloose Flesh, Ben Bum, the Horizon Kid', part cowboy, part confidence man (TF 271). When Ben describes himself however as having 'a hand in making America look like America', or of having 'the stars-and-stripes vision', or indeed of franchising a movie theatre that draws 'the cream of [his] American public [...]' over the great concretized, bulldozed no-man's lands of the new America' into malls with names like 'Heaven on Earth Way, Earthly Paradise Park' that represent 'the realism of our visionary democracy', Elkin is positioning him at a point of precariousness where the mythical ambitions of the past have become the casual labels of the present (TF 201,213,262). Ben is the self-styled descendent of a line that stretches from Winthrop to Franklin to Henry Ford. But he is also the bag-carrier for a culture which has turned original innovation into repetitive brand and homogenised the memory of a landscape of sublime promise.

That Ben is a portmanteau site for the playing-out of American narratives is further underlined by his story's framing as one of rags-to-riches, taking place in a 'fairylane' of happy endings (TF 19). Orphaned by a wartime car accident, he is a latter-day equivalent to Alger's Ragged Dick. And like an Alger hero, Ben Flesh stumbles into rather than earns the opportunity that will make his fortune: his benefactor, theatrical costume magnate Julius Finsberg, bequeaths to Ben access to ready capital as long as he 'stud[ies] hard at Wharton [...]' Study hard. Promise me' (TF 31). Ben's story begins therefore in a Gilded Age literary tradition where wealth and success are 'a direct consequence of honesty, thrift, self-reliance, industry, a cheerful whistle and an open, manly face'.⁵²

But where Alger's heroes tended to realise the values of a Puritan New England, confronting and challenging the vicissitudes of nineteenth-century urbanisation and

⁵² Weiss, p.49.

industrialisation, Elkin's latter-day version is living out the values of show business in a culture where the dynamics of the American industrial revolution have been displaced by the images of consumer capitalism. The fortune to which Ben inherits access is built on 'the Golden Age of Costumes', the decking-out of the musical theatre shows that emerged as one of America's major twentieth century popular cultural achievements. Ben remembers their titles on Broadway and recalls seeing their 'emblems and clever trademarks, individual as flags, in magazine ads or above the passengers' heads on buses' (TF 17,25). Later, Ben will see his franchises in theatrical terms: 'I have about a dozen now [...] I'm like a producer with several shows running on Broadway at the same time. My businesses take me from place to place. My home is these United States' (TF 34). And later again, Ben will combine a theatrical inheritance with his Alger-like ambition to succeed in 'these United States' to realise:

His need to costume his country, to give it its visible props, its mansard roofs and golden arches and false belfries, all its ubiquitous, familiar neon signatures and logos, all its *things*, and its *crap*, the true American graffiti, that perfect calligraphy of American signature. (TF 270)

Ben Flesh operates therefore inside a volatile mythical matrix: a near mystical, rags-to-riches aspiration towards progress and achievement, Franklin meets Ford at the frontier, realised in part through an abiding faith in theatrical happy endings and manoeuvring in turn through a landscape relieved of its primal wildness by the homogeneous trademarks that map its pathways. Ben sees himself embodying a 'noble [...] heroic [...] epic' foundational vision:

I was in the big time now. Up there, at least in spirit, with Aeneas, Brigham Young, Penn and Pike and Penrose, with Roger Williams [...] with Disney himself, the Disney of Anaheim no less than the Disney of Florida. Up there [...] with all those Founders, legendary and historic, with a sense of timing and prophecy on them, perfect pitch for the potential incipient in what lesser men might have looked on as hills, desert, swampland, stony ground. (TF 303)

The bravura of this 'all-American' narrative, however, is already beset by instability and contradiction. For all that it includes national 'Founders' like the Puritan theologian Roger Williams who established the first settlement at Rhode Island in 1636, Brigham Young who took his Latter-day Saints into the West in the 1840s, and William Penn who gave his name to Pennsylvania, it also includes Walt Disney whose amusement parks, featuring Main Street U.S.A. and Frontierland, perpetuate a commodified version of an idealised American past.⁵³

⁵³ Or in Baudrillard something more complex: an unreality designed to distract from the unreality beyond of America itself. Baudrillard, *Simulacra*, p.12-13.

The narrative to which Ben aspires already equivocates between history and a mythologised version of that history re-mediated into commerce. Add to that, Ben's own self-perceived equivalence to Penn and Disney in fashioning the American landscape. In another part of his conversation with Colonel Sanders, Ben announces:

"I am a franchiser."

"Franchiser, eh. What sort of franchises you sell? What's your product?"

"I buy franchises."

Colonel Sanders looked at him suspiciously. "You're a damn liar, son. If you bought franchises you'd see the contract calls you the 'franchisee'."

"That's always sounded like a cross between a Frenchman and a Chinaman. I call myself a franchiser." (TF 79)

Ben refashions the ownership of franchises into a grand strategy of enterprise in and of itself. The dependency on someone else's idea and image is displaced by the assertion that, in his hands, it is a project as innovative as, say, Edison's invention of the light bulb. And as such it has an equal claim to being a foundational idea.

In Ben's mind, the *franchiser* is a foundational figure who is re-mapping America. He is the owner 'of franchises from one end of the country to the other'; 'anywhere he went he would be at the centre [of America]; in his Cadillac he 'patrols America'; 'I'm the culture [...] my home is these United States' (TF 19,333,193,34). And the map, as Ben tells a Radio Shack convention, is as precisely conceived as a franchise's business stipulations:

What I have is total recall for my country [...] I'm this mnemonic patriot of place. Look at a map of the U.S. See its jigsaw pieces? I know where everything goes. I could take it apart and put it together in the dark. (TF 213)

It is, however, in the novel's ultimate tension between Ben's assertive vision of himself as the embodiment of a franchised idea of America, and the franchise model's latent instabilities that Elkin registers a political diagnosis. Elkin continually blurs the line between a sense of Ben as a discrete individual, as a character defined by particular tendencies and circumstances, and of Ben *Flesh* as an *emblem*, a vector for the exploration of the vulnerabilities inside America's mythologies. By positioning himself as a franchiser, where the franchise he is selling is an America reconfigured as the product of his own goals and imaginings, Ben markets an emblematic sense of national self-belief, while simultaneously having to negotiate the systemic and personal circumstances that render that self-belief ultimately unstable.

4.3.3. Decay, MS and the Family Finsberg.

The Franchiser piles contestation upon contestation. Its core motif, the franchise, oscillates between a promise of democratised achievement and the instabilities of image detached from substance. The novel's protagonist parlays his own lack of substance into a latter-day refashioning of foundational myth while sidestepping the irony that his own privileged success model is a form of franchise, already unstable, in itself. And then, in the next amplification in the novel's interlocking fabulations, there is the degree to which Elkin embeds these already contested ideas into a grotesque family drama which in turn projects their instabilities back through history, and across society.

The Finsberg family, heirs to a theatrical costume empire and Ben's backers are, first, a form of franchise in themselves. There are eighteen of them, twins and triplets, one trademark face, repeated incarnations, and it is their collective enthusiasm for the idea of buying ice-cream from a Howard Johnson's that originally inspires Ben's business plan:

"It isn't the ice cream" Jerome said [...]

"Well, what is it then?"

"Don't you see?" Irving asked. "Don't you understand?" [...]

"That those places," Lorenz said,

"they're – "said Jerome and Mary,

"- all the SAME," said Sigmund-Rudolph and Gertrude and Moss.

"Just – "Gus-Ira said

"- like *us!*" said they all. (TF 45)

The ostensive consensus contained in this bizarre image of eighteen genetically similar faces finding their correspondence and legitimisation in a replicated restaurant chain already infers contradictions however. As much as they take comfort in the reassuring image of a franchised ice-cream, they are themselves the franchised offspring of a trade in equivocal images.

Their wealth for example originated in a con-trick. Their father Julius cheated Ben's father out of their joint business by cutting cards and palming a winning deuce. Their wealth grew, meanwhile, thanks to 'a renaissance in the American musical theatre', the supply of sartorial flamboyance to the Broadway narrative of happy endings that defined much of American popular culture during the Depression, the New Deal and beyond:

Who'd have thought [...] that Cole Porter would come up with all those tunes, that Gershwin and Gus Kahn and Irving Berlin and Hammerstein [...] that they'd set America's toes to tapping, that Ethel Merman and Astaire would catch on like that [...] the Golden Age of Costumes. (TF 28, 17)

The Finsbergs' names – Gus-Ira (Kahn/Gershwin), Irving, Oscar, Jerome (Kern) – suggest the family has franchised the proposition of the Golden Age Broadway musical itself, of *Lady Be Good* (1924) and *Oklahoma!* (1943) among others, shows which largely projected national optimism and down-home American values. At the same time, however, that same popular cultural renaissance contains a structural weakness. The Finsberg siblings are, quite literally, the genetically suspect offspring of the musical theatre itself. Their mother, Julius tells Ben early in the novel:

was a hooper [with] this incredible pelvis [...] you can imagine what twenty years of pli   would do to a girl with a fantastic pelvis to begin with [...] Estelle turned out to be very fecund [...] that woman had babies like a mosquito lays eggs. (TF 29)

The Finsbergs' 'very *genes* had become like a single minting of dimes', a human franchise which is already vulnerable to its own fraudulent origins and flawed replication as sibling after sibling dies a 'ludicrous death': one has bones heavy as lead and drowns in the shower; another with unrelieved constipation evacuates his own intestines under medical examination (TF 295).

In the grotesque story of the family Finsberg, Elkin fabulates a complex amalgam of contestations. They are, on the one hand, the materially successful heirs to a popular cultural tradition of happy endings and an embodiment of a shared, democratic, access to the franchised products of affluence: 'we were always [...] musical comedy sort of people' chorus four family survivors at a funeral after five of their siblings have died within thirty-six hours (TF 287). On the other hand, their very origins in those American narratives have condemned them to generational decline. They are a 'strange fairy tale crew' who 'all their lives [have] lived behind the costumes of their faces' and who are ultimately democratised in their collective decay, 'they grew apart', Ben ruefully recognises, 'but they died together' (TF 307,289).

But the genetic flaws, and contestations, the Finsbergs enact extend beyond their immediate circumstances and infect, Elkin suggests, the wider body politic. In one key episode, for example, situated in an emblematic American frontier wilderness, the Finsberg illness inspires a revelation in which Ben confronts the myth of America he believes in, and the less heroic America in which his particular narrative of success has eventuated.

Ben has formed a sexual relationship with Patty, one of the surviving Finsberg sisters. They have travelled to the Rockies, and are staying at the Broadmoor resort in Colorado Springs, 'a pink Monaco castle' that in itself has inserted a garish image of modern consumer culture into the primal landscape of the American West (*TF* 180-211). Patty's genetic malady is a disconcerting tendency to proclaim sudden insights – 'She was not the Insight Lady for nothing' – during the heights of passion:

"Oh. Oh," Ben cried.

"Have you ever noticed," she squealed, "how bottles of salad dressing are all the same shape, tall necks and wide, bells-shaped t-t-torsos?"

"Oh, God," Ben shivered. "Oh God".

Infected, as it were, by Patty's genetic malady, Ben spends his errand in the wilderness unravelling the very notion of trademark proliferation and landscape homogenisation to which the franchiser has committed himself. The sight, for example, of skaters on the hotel ice-rink demonstrating 'transcendent self-possession' confronts him with an 'accusation of a wasted life, of the wrong moral choices'. Trademarks are analysed graphologically for their power to exert 'a compelling influence on people [by winning] their affection and confidence'. And in a torrent of high energy product analysis – where his mind turns to the 'arbitrary shapes' of cuts of meat, the windows in pasta boxes, and why toothpaste comes in tubes rather than jars – Ben arrives at an orgasmic insight of his own:

We read shapes. The culture is preliterate [...] Nobody with money invested ever took it for granted that a single mother's son of us could read. They think we're so *dumb*. We *are* so dumb. And they are too. So we get these *symbols*. The mustard jar is a symbol and the candy bar a symbol too. We live with molds, castings, with paradigms and modalities. With recognizable shapes. With – *oh, God* – trademarks like the polestar [...] We live in Plato's sky!

Ben, of course, has already identified himself as 'the culture. Ben Flesh, the Avon lady, Ben the Burger King', so his 'insight' is as much a repudiation of his own 'franchiser' business model as it is a repudiation of a passive citizenry consuming simulacra. But the political power of this moment extends beyond its critique of consumer culture.

The references to Plato and the polestar suggest that Ben's franchise culture has become a new form of national ideal, an absolute standard towards which America has now deflected its foundational trajectory. No surprise then that when Ben and Patty travel, like early pioneers on horseback, deep into the mountains and encounter a primal wilderness 'spectacular and immense', they simultaneously experience an atavistic encounter with the

sublime, and a modern sense of disorientation and recoil. They are, on the one hand, 'in nature' with 'no place to hide in nature save in the wonderful'. But on the other hand, 'they felt themselves separated from the culture they had talked about, on which each thrived'; Ben himself is suddenly 'out of his element, the franchiser disenfranchised. Miles from the culture, from the trademark and trade routes of his own long Marco Polo life'.

This episode discloses two competing visions of America, both refracted through Ben Flesh as spokesperson-cum-performer. The first is in keeping with America's historical vision of itself as a land of plenty, of unlimited opportunity and of rugged individualism. The other is of an America collectivised around a common idea of commerce, the obstacles along its historical 'Marco Polo' trade routes into the wilderness paved over by the convenience of repeated symbols and predictable delivery: the franchise as emblem of variety diminished and authenticity supplanted. To the extent that these two visions are contradictory and mutually destabilising and to the extent too that both oscillate through the figure of the franchiser himself, Elkin produces a complex account of an America at odds with itself.

4.3.4 Interlocking Structures and the Cascade into Chaos.

Much of *The Franchiser's* imaginative force, and much of its politics, are contained in its distinctiveness of structure. The novel is bracketed by a single gesture, its action sweeping through history and geography between the moment when an apparently optimistic Ben Flesh climbs into his car in Birmingham Alabama – 'It's a beautiful day in the United States of America' – and the moment, in the final chapter, when he 'turns the ignition key' (TF 5,335). The intervening text cumulatively ironises, dismantles and ultimately expresses a mournful sadness in the bravura vision of America as a 'packed masonry of states' that opens the novel: the grand image of an America unified by its networks of 'golden arches' and trademarks (TF 3).

The opening vision positions Ben in his Cadillac as a latter-day pioneer, 'shooting the smooth rapids of traffic, into the wide cement of American delta', remapping the American landscape with multiple small business investments in a New Frontier celebration of democratic access to affluence (TF 3). By the end of the novel, however, as he finally drives away, Ben's heroic vision has liquidated his failing businesses into one last franchise, a Travel Inn, which is 'a disaster' (TF 342). And, as his MS conspires to kill him, his last thought is of diminishing returns: 'he was broken' and all he has to show for his life was that he was once alive at least rather than 'change in someone's pocket, or a lost dollar nobody found' (TF 342).

The effect of this framing structure is to concentrate the novel's fragmented episodes and centrifugal bursts of rhetoric into one moment, exploding and exploring, as it were, the circumstances that prompt a blink-of-an-eye transition from hope to despair. And that momentary transition takes place in a diegetic here-and-now which is also, at the point of publication, a political and cultural here-and-now. Thus the framing structure concentrates the novel's debate over its collection of mythologies into a critical moment of history: a period of national bicentennial self-evaluation amid a climate of intense economic and political uncertainty. That debate pivots in turn, and is thrown into relief, by a central episode which translates real-world politics and economics into a metaphor for overwhelming cultural crisis.

It is 1971. The central U.S. is suffering a 'record heat wave' and 'extraordinary demands on the energy supplies [are causing] breakdowns and brownouts all over' (TF 120 – 153). In a hospital in Rapid City, South Dakota, Ben has just been formally diagnosed with MS, 'demyelinating nerves sputtering like live wires in his fingertips'. The heat meanwhile is destroying his Mister Softee outlet, 'it's rancid glop [...] a whole lake of the shit'. The three scenarios concatenate a gross notion of unrestrained systemic breakdown in which the privileged notion of the franchise itself, and the mythical connections Ben (and Elkin) have attached to it, are imploding around their contradictions.

In this, Ben identifies himself as the self-categorised *franchiser* ('I am Mister Softee here and Chicken from the Colonel there') before a fellow patient likens his melting ice-cream to a disease: 'oral lesions, yellow centres and erythemystotic halos. Rather like one of your lovely Mister Softee concoctions'. Ben, his self-image as an American businessman and the businesses with which he identifies are linked together in a pathology that will ultimately condemn them all to paralysis and inertia: 'the point is', Ben tells his fellow patient, 'the lines of the drama of my life are beginning to come together [...] I'm one of those birds who ain't satisfied unless he has a destiny, even though he knows that destiny sucks'.

Ben's diagnosis however – exposing equally the physical vulnerability of his body and figurative vulnerability of his business model – is not confined to his own discrete nervous system. It extends, like a franchise, outwards across America to suggest an entire system, and a culture, in deterioration. In the hospital, the power outages have let the lunatics free in the asylum, 'Flesh was kept awake nights by the shrieks and howls of the nearby mad', and Ben envisages his condition and his ruined ice-cream shop in eschatological terms, as the judgment of an angry God: 'The Lord has beaten the Mister Softee back into yoghurt cultures [...] the plague is general throughout Dakota. We're being visited and smited'. We are referred, once again, to Jonathan Edwards, the Great Awakening, and the persistent equivocation over

acquisition and moral exceptionalism.

Thus far, in this pivotal episode, Elkin's escalating images have located his protagonist in a deteriorating American landscape as the hapless focus for, and symptom of, a diseased system beyond his control. As Ben leaves the hospital however, and heads through the night towards the geographical centre of the U.S., Elkin modulates his religious imagery of Puritan self-mortification into an even grander vision of American self-destruction. Here, Ben is cast as 'a refugee now. A survivor, the last alive perhaps' carving his way through a mid-Western 'wilderness':

He put the car in gear and drove against the record heat wave, looking for a hole in it as pioneers travelling west might once have looked for a passage through the mountains, as explorers had paddled and portaged to seek a northwest passage [...] feeling chased by brownouts and power-failed space, civilisation's demyelination.

The references to the first settlers heading away from the old world, and to Lewis and Clark mapping the far reaches of the new, link the franchiser with a history and a mythology of nation-building: Ben mapping America with his businesses outlets. At the same time however the heat which has returned the heart of the Union to an entropic, power-deprived darkness suggests that the very narrative that was designed to open up America's resources has imploded. On Interstate 70, amidst the plains of Kansas, the radio goes silent as Ben spots a field of nodding donkey oil pumps, still pulling wealth from the ground: 'they gave him the impression of tremendous reservoirs of power, indifferent opulence [...] there was no brownout here'. The image suggests an uncritical drive towards gain regardless of auto-destructive consequence, 'Wichita had been without electricity for two days while these thirsty monsters of vacant west central Kansas used up enough to sustain a city of millions'. The irony deepens as Flesh speculates that the continuous pumping is a national priority: 'oil for the lamps of Asia, for the tanks and planes of political commitment and intervention' – America expending power, not least in Vietnam, even as OPEC was about to force Americans to retrench at home.

Against this backdrop of over-reach and impending night, Ben's pioneer efforts to somehow revive the foundational narrative, to 'look[-] over the broad plains for the lights of a town, any town, a prospector of the electric', to manage his diminishing fuel and steer his Cadillac out of the wilderness, seem ultimately doomed to failure. In the very centre of America, in Columbus Nebraska, the only light that is burning is an eternal flame to the American dead, 'Columbus Nebraskans of World Wars I and II, Korea and Vietnam [...] who had died in the wars to preserve his freedom'.

In combination, the novel's hospital and American night episodes represent a dense cluster of references – mythological, historical, topical, commercial – circling around one core metaphor: MS, an auto-immune disease. Multiple systems by which America has and continues to legitimise and assert itself are, the novel suggests, not only running out of energy but also consuming themselves. To that extent, the novel locates a prevailing atmosphere of entropy inside a series of political and cultural contexts. America as a 'power-failed space' whose 'molecules are drifting away from each other' and which is 'stuffed to bursting with its cargo of crap' is refracted through a protagonist whose impending physical inertia is itself a metaphor for a set of imperatives he (and America) can no longer sustain:

"I'm talking energy," Ben said. "There isn't enough" [...]. Where shall we get the churches, how shall we have the money for the schools and symphonies and the stadia, for the sweet water and the railroads, all the civilised up-front vigorish that attracts industry and pulls the big money?

"It ain't in me. I couldn't have made the world, I couldn't have imagined it. My God, I can barely live in it [...] There isn't enough energy to drive my body. How can there be enough to run Akron?" (TF 21, 257-8)

The immediate context for this passage is the energy crisis of October 1973. The degree however to which Ben's rhetoric modulates from the topically specific to the universal, via the personal and the national – opportunity and progress realised in America's physical landscape – is an index to the novel's ultimate politics. The dynamics of a particular historical moment, the mid-70s crisis in American confidence, are projected onto and through the precariousness of a business model, the franchise, which is itself diagnosed as the fragile product of latent contradictions in a national myth of unassailable progress and affluence.

4.3.5. Terminal Expressions of Crisis.

The Franchiser's climate of crisis is contained, substantially, in the interlocking circuits which cumulatively pronounce on the instabilities inside the national belief – embodied in Ben Flesh – that America offers 'all sorts of success stories [...] that the world was a fairyland still' (TF 19). The novel's immediate *politics* of crisis, however, are expressed in the way mythical contestations throw into relief contemporary events: in the realisation of a mid-70s America whose struggling economy mocks, Elkin suggests, the very narratives on which it was once predicated. Here, Ben's terminal sense that he is 'broken', that his internal systemic breakdown, MS, 'would kill him', and that his social system 'the Finsbergs were an endangered

species', ripples outwards to include and infect the two business decisions by which the novel brings its diagnosis of national entropy into immediate and topical focus (TF 342).

In a run-down Fred Astaire Dance Studio franchise in Chicago, and in the last-ditch Travel Inn franchise in Ringgold Georgia into which Ben has poured all his resources, *The Franchiser* inscribes two, near journalistic, accounts of economic over-reach and locates both inside the assertion of mythical narratives which have resisted confronting their own contestations.

The novel goes to Chicago at the point where Ben is staging a last dance gala for an ad hoc collection of clients and to Georgia at the point where Ben is unveiling his crowning glory, 'noble. In a way, heroic, even epic', an interstate-hotel-cum-imagined-frontier-settlement which registers 'America's [...] gravitational pull' and, he hopes, 'will draw Americans like flies' (TF 303,301). And yet, strangely, both episodes explore the same underlying conditions: both express a near euphoric optimism rooted in mythical and popular cultural assertion but both are forced to confront processes of history which expose their delusions. They both, in short, end up as run-down mockeries of the national assumptions that attended their founding.

At the most immediately topical level, both franchises have lost contact with the economic and social realities around them. By 1975, U.S. unemployment had risen to 8.5%.⁵⁴ The number of manufacturing businesses in Chicago alone – at the epicentre of the rust belt – fell by 10% between 1967 and 1977.⁵⁵ Ben's dance studio is located downtown 'where a lot of people are afraid to come', surrounded by 'proliferating porno bookstores', the last occupant of a building which others have long since abandoned: it is 'a losing proposition' (TF 55,53). The site of the Travel Inn, meanwhile, chosen to be 'the most probable location' to profit from the 'long, difficult drive from Chicago or Cleveland' to newly-built Disney World in Florida, turns out to be less the latter-day frontier outpost Ben plans than 'nowhere. It was not a place. Not geographically viable' (TF 300,309). OPEC, the Yom Kippur War, the national 55 mph speed limit have created a 'new dispensation' where Ben is now an 'old-timer': 'if he lived he would live crippled in the new world' (TF 306-7). At issue however is not Ben's business acumen. Rather it is the extent to which their failure exposes the instabilities always and already present in the mythology to which he aspires.

⁵⁴ The U.S. Department of Labour, *Bureau of Labour Statistics* < <http://data.bls.gov> > [accessed 10 July 2016]

⁵⁵ University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Centre for Economic Development, 'Employment, Unemployment and Job Growth' in *The Economic State of Milwaukee: The City and the Region* < <https://www4.uwm.edu/ced/publications/milwecon> > [accessed 10 July 2016]

Consider first, the Fred Astaire Dance Studio. 'America's my ballroom', Ben declares as if to insist that his moribund business still, like his other franchises, is fundamental to the design of the entire country, 'franchises like some screwy version of Manifest Destiny' (TF 68). In this it channels a collection of narratives. There's the popular cultural uplift of Golden Age Hollywood where movies like *Top Hat* (1935) – 'I come' Ben announces, 'from Fred Astaire! I bring Ginger Rogers' spicy "Hi"' – once sought to distract from the Depression (TF 63). Now the image/memory of Astaire's America is invoked to distract from a modern America where 'murders are done [...] farmers nose-dive from threshers, supply and demand don't work the way they used to, and even our President's at a loss' (TF 64). 'Smile, you fuckers', Ben tells his bemused staff and clients, 'laugh, you shitlings. I come from Fred Astaire, *everybody dance!*' (TF 65). The decaying ballroom itself, meanwhile, is synthesised from Ben's personal history and individual myth of success. The stage is made from the cutting tables his father and Julius Finsberg used for their costume business, 'we are in a room with a musical tradition'; the franchise was acquired thanks to his prime interest rate guarantee, 'we dance to the prime interest rate itself' (TF 62). But all this in a new dispensation where interest rates are climbing, and where the near mythic elegance of Astaire and Rogers has been supplanted by instructors who sell their bodies rather than waltz lessons: 'What is it here, a massage parlour?' (TF 57).

The crisis sense that not only is this franchise decaying, but that the entire project Ben is promoting – the 'coast-to-coast America he'd helped design', America as his 'ballroom' – is ultimately unsustainable, is projected through one of Elkin's rich bursts of language. As the motley collection of guests traipses aimlessly through the ballroom, the dance floor disappears under a sedimentary layer of rotting party food. 'Lai-op, lai-op, lai-op', a bottle breaks and shoes 'smeared the ballroom floor with a jelly of ketchup' (TF 61). As 'Happy Days Are Here Again' plays on the gramophone:

They moved over fallen hors d'oeuvres, stepping on the soft crusts and squashing them like bugs. Bits of pork and rice, of shrimp, chunks of chicken exploded like delicious gut under their weight. Dark sauces thick as blood stained the dance floor. (TF 66)

Ballroom America is rotting and dying: the footprints of its last dancers mapped out in the 'schmutz of a broken ketchup bottle' (TF 61). Even Ben's attempt to make this franchise's last moments a success, 'we're going down first class' he says, tumbles ironically into the decay of its own celebration (TF 56).

A similar sense of irony and ultimate instability takes hold at Ringgold Georgia where another of Ben's maps of America coalesces around a venture which he registers in mythical terms, but which eventuates in crisis. In his Travel Inn, Ben has initiated a foundational act,

joining 'that long line of visionaries who defoliated jungle simply by giving it their attention [...] who second and third guessed the shabby givens of place and impediment, Johnny Appleseeds of commerce and government' (*TF* 303). The irony that, by the mid-70s, 'defoliating' would have suggested Agent Orange and Vietnam notwithstanding, Ben wraps up this aggregation of folklore and Winthrop-ian first endeavour into a narrative of commercial success that transforms the franchise itself into a final mythical act of nation-building with himself at its centre:

Ben, the empire-builder, the from-sea-to-shining sea kid connecting the dots, Howard Johnson to Burger King, Burger King to IHOP, IHOP to Midas Muffler – he had made it – what? A sort of place [...] Everywhere place sucking sort of place into its orbit. (*TF* 310).

And even as the motel falters, as it fails to pull business into its orbit, Ben stares at the map of America and persists in the belief that his myth of success will continue to shape a country despite the deterioration in its material systems:

He is the centre. If he were to leave now, striking out in any direction, northwest to Nashville, south to Panama City, Florida, it would make no difference. He would stand before maps like this one in other Travel Inns. Anywhere he went would be the centre. He would pull the centre with him, the world rearranging itself about him. (*TF* 333)

Elkin describes this moment of ontological self-assertion in the face of terminal failure as 'the start of (Ben's) ecstasy attack'. The phrase contains notions of unbridled rapture, of spiritual transportation and of hallucination, alongside a loss of control and consciousness. And it marks the moment when Ben's MS finally arrives at his brain, a euphoria 'chemical, of course, symptomatic' (*TF* 342).

In this concluding image, Elkin delivers his gloomiest verdict on the fragile mythologies and escalating sense of crisis that have combined into the texture of his novel about the American mid-70s. They are ultimately, it suggests, a form of sickness: a compulsion to retain illusory beliefs even as systems, internal and external, breakdown.

Faust uses metafiction to intervene between a topical predilection for mythical construction and the contesting buffetings of history and contemporary events. Wurlitzer uses a stripped-back minimalism to ontologically expose the elaborate promises contained in the political reinvocation of foundational stories. Elkin's novels of the Nixon Years meanwhile conjoin elements of both into rich fabulations, shot through with a teeming, but unstable, rhetoric which captures the near religious zeal that attends the myth of success, together with an

uncomfortable fear of over-reach. Both *A Bad Man* and *The Franchiser* create versions of American space – fabulous and grotesque by turns - where mythical ambitions spiral off into grandiose images, before teetering over into their fragility and lack of ultimate substance. As such, they mediate a climate of crisis where it seems whole swathes of American history and American myth, and the equivocations which oscillate between the two, culminate and then collapse into one turn-of-the-decade moment: an entropic point where the world catches up with America's material assertions and sucks the energy out of its exceptionalist projects, the substance out of its landscape's abundance.

Chapter Five

Donald Barthelme – Contested Myths of Leadership.

Thus far I have argued that an emerging postmodernist fiction of the Nixon Years projects a distinctive, topically specific, political character by virtue of its formal engagements with a climate of contestation between American myth, historical contingency and contemporary disruption. That argument has been made, however, through writers who are on the fringes of what passes for a postmodernist 'canon' which has, for example, Pynchon, Barth, Burroughs, Vonnegut, Coover and Barthelme at its core.¹ This raises the inevitable question of whether the politics I am suggesting are restricted to an ad hoc group of ex-centric practitioners, or whether they can be perceived also in what criticism has since identified as the major postmodernist writing of the late 60s and early 70s.

Donald Barthelme's most highly regarded work coincided with the decline of the Johnson presidency and the subsequent Nixon administration: the period between the violent summer of '68 and Watergate is bracketed by *Snow White* and *The Dead Father*. But while some commentators see him closely engaged with the 'bewildering multiplicity of life in the late twentieth century', a larger number highlight an elusiveness which privileges formal play over politics: his stories are 'seemingly chaotic [resistant to] paraphrasable interpretation'; encyclopaedic 'he seems to have read everything'; they play with 'beautiful *dreck*', the junk and fragments of his adjacent culture.² This chapter will argue however that when Barthelme's work is refracted through the mythical concerns, and formal analytical processes, of other Nixon Years writers a more politically activist sense of his work emerges. Those politics cluster in turn around Barthelme's provocative riffs on the issue of leadership and on the president as a both a politically actual and metaphoric figure who enunciates America's mythical assumptions but also embodies the vagaries of its history.

In the foreword to *Guilty Pleasures* (1974), Barthelme writes:

A number of the pieces are political satire directed against a particular Administration. One can attempt to explain this Administration in a variety of ways, but *folie à deux* is perhaps too optimistic, and on the other hand I do not want to believe that we get what we deserve. Thus

¹ See footnote 9, page 8.

² Richard F. Patteson, 'Introduction', in *Collected Essays on Donald Barthelme*, ed. by Richard F. Patteson (New York: G.J. Hall and Co., 1992), pp.5-21 (p.5); McCaffery, p.99; Lois Gordon, *Donald Barthelme* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), p.33; Tanner, p.402.

these efforts must be classified, I suppose, as simple stunned expressions of wonder at the fullness and mysteriousness of our political life.³

Barthelme was writing during Watergate. Within a year, Nixon would resign. And in simple terms Barthelme's political orientation is clear. 'Swallowing', a *New York Times* op-ed published on the eve of the 1972 election was explicitly partisan:

The American people have swallowed a lot in the last four years [...] We have swallowed electric bugs, laundered money, quite a handsome amount of grain moving about in mysterious ways, a war more shameful than can be imagined, much else. There are even people who believe that the President does not invariably tell the truth about himself or ourselves – he tells us *something*, we swallow that.⁴

But the foreword raises questions about the politics of Barthelme's writing that extend beyond the fact that Nixon and Watergate, according to Pynchon, 'sure did get him revved up'.⁵

In the delicately poised 'attempt to explain this Administration', there is a clear effort to understand not only Nixon himself but, more perhaps, the demotic currents that culminated in a crisis in national leadership. In language that equivocates between collective delusion – '*folie à deux*' – and collective responsibility – 'we get what we deserve' – Barthelme seems to suggest that America has connived at a willing seduction, dubious about the candidate but prepared to elect him president nonetheless. His sense of 'stunned wonder' suggests the act of seduction might reside in a subscription to some hard-to-define notion of what resonates in U.S. 'political life'. The phrase 'fullness and mysteriousness' may be ironic – Nixon *was* secretive – but it also suggests that political leadership projects qualities that attract public belief, regardless of who demonstrates them.

This thesis has distinguished three discrete mythologies in the construction of – and contestations inside – American public belief. In Barthelme, these strands-of-thinking intertwine into a restless debate over the rhetoric of authority, the promotion of national trajectory and the production of political purpose which resonates through textual circuits which invoke narratives from history and collective popular culture in their 'fullness' and the seductive power of foundational myths in their 'mysteriousness'. Simultaneously however Barthelme consistently exposes those narratives to the contestations of irony, fragmentation, and metafictional self-consciousness. And in the three-way conversation between a volatility

³ Foreword to Donald Barthelme, *Guilty Pleasures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), no page number in text.

⁴ Donald Barthelme, 'Swallowing', in *The Teachings of Don B.*, ed. by Kim Herzinger (New York: Vintage, 1998), pp.159–161 (p.159).

⁵ Thomas Pynchon, 'Introduction', in *The Teachings of Don B.*, pp.xv-xxii (p.xv).

of form, a simultaneous promotion and destabilisation of American myth, and an accumulation of slippery contemporary reference, Barthelme's fictions register, first, a climate of crisis and, second, a series of political interventions. As the op-ed 'Swallowing' suggests, it is the responsibility of the artist to offer 'remedies'.

Central to this analysis is the presidency itself. Not Nixon in isolation, but rather the assumptions – historical, cultural, mythical – which attach to national authority regardless of party: the sense, somewhere between patronage and reassurance, that the U.S. president might be 'the father of us all'.⁶ This chapter will examine three notable short stories of the Nixon Years to demonstrate how contemporary political circumstances are mediated through Barthelme's postmodernist strategies. Those perspectives will then inform an account of the two novels – *Snow White* and *The Dead Father* – which, in combination, chart the politics of frustrated optimism leading to despair and ultimate inertia which marked the transition in the American culture of leadership from Kennedy's early 60s to the Watergate mid-70s.

5.1. Bossa Nova, or Engagement.

In 1987, Donald Barthelme offered a generative insight into his practice. Writing was partly about 'not-knowing', uninhibited exploration through play: 'without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention'.⁷ But writing also had to negotiate its *political* role, as potential intervention or as unexamined fellow traveller: 'the question is, what is the complicity of language in the massive crimes of Fascism, Stalinism, or (by implication) our own policies in Vietnam?'.⁸

The essay was a defence of 'the alleged Postmodernists' against the accusation their work was 'not about the world but about its own processes'.⁹ It highlights however a sustained duality in the principal approaches to Barthelme himself which lurch between the analysis of form and the extraction of elusive reference, a debate which has only recently begun to position Barthelme as a political writer. McCaffrey characterises this as the 'Theory of Non-Meaning or Art as Object approach' vs. the 'Theory of Meanings approach' where the former privileges Barthelme's 'recycling [of] the linguistic elements of modern life into new objects' and the latter detects a gross theme of cultural disintegration in 'his seeming

⁶ Donald Barthelme, 'The Young Visiters', in *Guilty Pleasures*, pp.69-72 (p.70).

⁷ Donald Barthelme, 'Not-Knowing', in *Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme*, ed. by Kim Hertzinger (New York: Random House, 1997), pp.11-24 (p.12).

⁸ Barthelme, 'Not-Knowing', p.16.

⁹ Barthelme, 'Not-Knowing', p.15.

opposition to the Vietnamese War, his largely negative or ironic attitude towards [...] the government, and his very direct interest in the way the language machine seems to be deteriorating'.¹⁰

Much of the commentary on Barthelme's work, mostly written before his death in 1989, privileges a largely detached formalism. Klinkowitz summed up his early reception by highlighting the perceived production of self-contained artworks which appeared to actively emphasise their political withdrawal: 'Barthelme's new aesthetic for fiction is that the work may stand for itself, that it need not yield to complete explication of something else in the world'.¹¹ In this, he echoed Sukenick ('the Bossa Nova is nonrepresentational - it represents itself [...] Barthelme is a writer who is very bossanova') and Tanner who highlighted a self-conscious rejection of 'inherited structures built into the common tongue' and a determinedly ludic inscription of 'a free-from artistic product, flexible, plastic and ephemeral'.¹² Later critics, in book length studies, would similarly focus on a perceived preference for the materiality of language (and image) over reference. Molesworth, for example, saw Barthelme as 'partly an archivist' of contemporary trivia and detritus, delivering work which 'has not "grown" from book to book [...] his technique of collage and parody have rather expanded in their application than deepened in their profundity'.¹³ Trachtenberg likened Barthelme's work to abstract painting which 'immerses the reader directly in [linguistic] experience' in an effort to confront 'a loss of reference to the world'.¹⁴

Other writers found evidence in Barthelme for their own constructions of postmodernism. His linguistic innovations combine in McHale's model of ontological dominance, for example, to form fictional constructs, whose job it appears is to *de-construct* familiar notions of space and, thereby, 'displace and rupture [the] automatic associations' by which readers negotiate the world around them.¹⁵ Thus, Barthelme's 'Paraguay is not the Paraguay that exists on our maps [it] exists elsewhere' in a story which, says McHale, deliberately contests any notion that 'encyclopaedic knowledge' means actually understanding the world.¹⁶ For other commentators Barthelme's formalist debate over constructs was

¹⁰ Larry McCaffery, 'Meaning and Non-Meaning in Barthelme's Fictions', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 13 (1979), 69-79 (pp.70,78).

¹¹ Klinkowitz, *Disruptions*, p.80.

¹² Ronald Sukenick, 'The New Tradition', *Partisan Review*, 39 (1972), 580 - 88 (p.587). Tanner, pp.16,405.

¹³ Charles Molesworth, *Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Save from Drowning* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), pp.20,80.

¹⁴ Stanley Trachtenberg, *Understanding Donald Barthelme* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), p.5.

¹⁵ McHale, p.48.

¹⁶ McHale, p.48.

metafictional. Interpreting 'The Balloon' as a 'story about writing stories', in which the art object resists analysis, and 'The Glass Mountain' as a satire which actively 'retracts' fiction's pretensions to narrative closure, Gordon went on to describe *The Dead Father* as a 'sustained metafiction' in which concrete meanings 'dissolve and, with geometric progression, shift in and out of other levels of signification'.¹⁷ McCaffery similarly identified a detachment in 'the way [Barthelme] uses his fiction to explore the nature of storytelling and the resources left to language and the fiction-maker'.¹⁸

Of course, these formal strategies do not in and of themselves deny reference or political possibility. Thus McCaffery, reflecting an emergent late 70s tendency to see postmodernist writing as tentatively referential after all, also tabulated a correspondence between Barthelme's techniques and an inscription of contemporary anxiety. 'A need to invent new revitalized literary forms' expressed 'ennui with life's familiarities'; an 'impulse to collage, verbal fragmentation, free association, and other methods of juxtaposition' communicated a 'sense of personal, political, and social fragmentation'.¹⁹

But even here, in the detection of what Klinkowitz in the 80s would suggest were 'Barthelme's own preferences [which] favour reference', there was a further duality: over what precisely Barthelme was referring to.²⁰ For some commentators, as McCaffery's table illustrates, Barthelme's work captured a *sense* of the world: what Gordon called an 'implied social criticism'.²¹ Wilde meanwhile suggested that Barthelme was a latter-day moralist whose 'midfiction' was 'stubbornly referential, acknowledging the pressures of the world it questions and refusing simply to privilege imagination at the expense of [...] "resisting reality"'.²²

More recent commentators however have detected a more interventionist, and less solely existential, attitude in Barthelme's writing. Maltby finds a distinctive 'dissident impulse' in a use of language whose embrace, amongst others, of the rhetoric of commodity culture risked being dismissed as a form of Pop Art at best, and 'depthlessness' (Jameson) at worst.²³ For Maltby, consumer 'dreck' is transformed by Barthelme's aggregations and collages into self-conscious 'hyper-dreck' which pronounces a 'resistance to the reified language of

¹⁷ Gordon, pp.90,112,161.

¹⁸ McCaffery, *Metafictional Muse*, p.100. See also Leitch, pp.129-43, for a discussion of Barthelme's resistance to narrative teleology.

¹⁹ Larry McCaffery, 'Donald Barthelme and the Metafictional Muse', *SubStance: Current Trends in American Fiction*, 9 (1980), 75-88 (p.78).

²⁰ Jerome Klinkowitz, *The Self-Apparent Word: Fiction as Language/Language as Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p.74.

²¹ Gordon, p.23.

²² Wilde, *Middle Grounds*, p.35.

²³ Maltby, p.44.

commodification' and which in turn contributes to a 'shatter [-ing of] the petrified form of consciousness embodied in a reified discourse [of a] bourgeois social order'.²⁴ Whalen-Bridge, by comparison, sees Barthelme's stories as a form of liberal manifesto where humour is an 'alternative to psychosis' as the author confronts American racism in the story 'Margins' and COINTELPRO surveillance in 'Sakrete'.²⁵

Where Maltby and Whalen-Bridge focus on oblique aesthetic subversion, other recent commentators detect a more direct confrontation with the nature of American power. In a reading of the 1964 story 'The President', Zeitlin invokes Baudrillard to suggest that, post JFK, the presidency has become more about image than substance – 'an object of mass fascination, love, guilt, mourning and unconscious fantasy [...] a symbol of the mystification of the realities of postmodern power and the repressed truth of social relations'.²⁶ Published just prior to the Tonkin Resolution, the story predicts 'some version of an American fascism-in-readiness'.²⁷ In an unpublished doctoral thesis, Chaskes goes further in relating elusive stories to specific political instances. Drawing on Tracey Daugherty's 2009 biography, Chaskes characterises Barthelme 'as a consistent opponent of reckless political authority [who] belongs to an avant-garde tradition of protest'.²⁸ Here the ontological space of 'Paraguay' becomes a Vietnam-style proxy site for American neo-colonialism by presenting itself as 'placeless', a delocalised empty 'vessel' to be filled by the 'U.S. political and cultural imagination'.²⁹ In the same analysis, *The Dead Father's* titular character is a 'Nixonesque antagonist'.³⁰

This survey suggests that commentary on Barthelme has largely tracked the developments in the wider debate over the politics of postmodernist writing: from formalist opposition to a tentative sense of interventionism. In this, individual stories – rather than the major novels – have been seen as localised instances of political critique. I will argue however that when Barthelme's Nixon Years writing is refracted through adjacent issues of myth and history, and when the richness of his formal innovations is set against the interrogatory strategies of other writers of the period, a more sustained sense of political engagement emerges. Barthelme's three-way strategy opens up – and makes available for political analysis,

²⁴ Maltby, pp.71,70,65.

²⁵ John Whalen-Bridge, 'The Politics of Playful Confrontation: Barthelme as Disgruntled Liberal', *Connotations*, 13 (2003), 246-69 (p.247).

²⁶ Michael Zeitlin, 'Donald Barthelme and the President of the United States', in *Productive Postmodernism: Consuming Histories and Cultural Studies*, ed. by John N. Duvall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 61-73 (pp. 66,68).

²⁷ Zeitlin, p.70.

²⁸ Daniel Chaskes, 'Beyond Fragmentation: Donald Barthelme and Writing as Political Act', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of British Columbia, 2012), p.21.

²⁹ Chaskes, p.195.

³⁰ Chaskes, p.195

perhaps even productive intervention – those intense moments in his contemporary American life where topical events tussle with mythical invocations, and where the self-conscious application of form exposes the deep contestations between the two.

5.2. Absent Causes – Present Politics.

An alternative reading of 'The President' to Zeitlin's positions it as an interrogation of the phenomena of leadership during an emerging early 60s 'period of tentativeness and uncertainty'.³¹ Here the specific divisions of the moment – the '64 election would pit Johnson's liberalism against Goldwater's apocalyptic conservatism – are subsumed into more fundamental questions about the construction of the American presidential narrative. As the President's elusiveness ('I can't make out what he is thinking') encounters public anxiety ('our exhausted age wishes above everything to plunge into the heart of the problem'), so the story explores the different modes of meaning-making that contrive to deliver trajectory into a potential crisis of unknowing: 'Is [the President] I wondered, right for this period?' (TP 152,153,151).

The story opens up critical space by effecting an ontological shift that simultaneously evokes and de-familiarises topical, real-world conditions. Barthelme's President is a 'strange fellow (only forty-eight inches at the shoulder)' whose pronounced shortness inevitably recalls incumbent Johnson, who was famously tall (TP 150). Into the consequent debate over image ('is strangeness alone enough?'), the story inserts a range of references which may, or may not, resolve image into political programme: 'I think he's got something up his sleeve nobody knows about' (TP 150,153). The President is weighed against the putative narrative continuities of White House history (there are references to Taft, Harding, Hoover, the Roosevelts) alongside the narratives conveyed by the media: a reference to 'on television, his face clouds when his name is mentioned' suggests the September 1960 debate between Nixon and Kennedy. But these narratives are contested even as they invoked: the Roosevelts were from different parties and, anyway, this President is 'not like the other Presidents we've had'; on tv, 'one hears only cadences' (TP 151,152).

Critically however this zone of presidential unknowing tentatively resolves nonetheless around a desperate faith in myth. The narrator may not be 'altogether sympathetic to the new President' but still 'expect[s] great things of him' (TP 152,155). This

³¹ Donald Barthelme, 'The President', in *Unspeaking Practices, Unnatural Acts* (New York; Pocket Books, 1976), pp.150-155 (p.151). Hereafter TP.

tension is precariously displaced into the metafictional intervention of the story's final moments where a crowd applauds the President as he steps 'through the roaring curtain' of a theatre. The allusions to Lincoln - and from his assassination to the more recent death of Kennedy and the American Camelot - are self-evident. It is as if a presidential notion of 'a mode of hope for millions' might be ultimately located in a *story* of office, an unstable and selective mythology which uncritically channels a nation-defining victory in the Civil War, or the exhilarations of the New Frontier, over the hard-to-navigate vagaries of history or of the actual office-holder (TP 154).

The debate around the construction of leadership, the projection of political meaning and the promise of national outcomes articulated in 'The President', intensified as the uncertainties of the early 60s became increasingly divisive in the Nixon Years. The analysis of the three stories that follows will explore the role played by Barthelme's signal formal strategies – fragmentation of language and rhetorical play, world-building, and metafictional self-consciousness – in a diagnosis of the contested mythologies that eventuated in a turn-of-the-decade climate of crisis.

5.2.1. Generative Fragmentation: 'Departures'.

'Departures' (1971) first presents as an exercise in revivifying language. Eight vignettes-cum-riffs on the subject of *departing* slip across each other like a figure in bebop jazz so as to amplify and complicate meanings otherwise narrowed by local context. The Hollywood-style departure of lover ('Now you are climbing aboard a great ship [...] it is sailing away from me!') juxtaposes with a clumsy escape:

"Are you pregnant?" She was wearing what appeared to be maternity clothes.

"No," she said, "I am not."

"Cab!"³²

A man *leaves* consciousness for surgery where a growth is *removed*; brothers cross the Mexican border to discover 'the benefits of *leaving* home' (italics mine); the 'ARMY PLANS TO FREEZE 3 MILLION BIRDS TO DEATH' in a grotesque *last exit*; and a single emboldened word, '**DUNKIRK**', indexes an historical *mass departure* from World War Two (D 98,100).

³² Donald Barthelme, 'Departures', in Donald Barthelme, *Sadness* (New York: Bantam, 1974), pp.97-107 (pp.107,106). Hereafter *D*.

But as much as the montage of fragments juxtaposes the romantic with the predatory, medicine with mass destruction, the swirl of ambiguities that blocks any meaning (or precarious synonym) of departure from escaping its contestations also radiates outwards into contemporary politics. Here a myth-vs-history crisis of resolvability – vignette five's fairy-tale about wood nymphs is pronouncedly discontinuous with vignette four's history of 'DUNKIRK' – infers a broader sense of crisis in the contested beliefs that attend the story's elusive references to the politics of the Nixon Years.

Consider vignette three, a fragment of reportage on busing. By October 1971, when this story appeared, America was adapting to the landmark Supreme Court ruling that rendered constitutional the forced integration of schoolchildren in states which still promoted segregation. The fragment captures this contested moment as a complex of social, emotional and political departures. Busing is seen as a liberal departure from inherited orthodoxies ('they are all good citizens and feel it must be done') but the children's departure is simultaneously an emotional wrench at best, a deracination at worst: 'the parents of the children in the bad areas may not like it much, either, having their children so far from home' (D 99,100). The moment's emotional weight gathers meanwhile around the tense mechanics of a process where children are lined up and counted and buses block the traffic:

When the drivers of these cars honk their horns too vigorously, the loadmaster steps away from the bus and yells at them in a voice louder than fourteen stacked-up drivers blowing their horns all at once: "KEEP YOUR PANTS ON!" (D 100)

This is a snapshot of contemporary political intensity: the progressive contends with emotional inertia as the momentous diffuses into the diurnal irritation of a traffic jam. And the contestations radiate outward to infer the contradictions inside a national constitutional narrative which saw a controversial policy implemented despite contrasting forms of reluctance: from Nixon, whose southern conservative base favoured gradual rather than forced desegregation, and from the Black Power movement which favoured Afro-American exceptionalism over multiculturalism as recompense for slavery. Thus, the busing vignette is suspended inside a network of contested agendas, like the historical moment of Dunkirk, somewhere between moral victory and tactical surrender. Tellingly the last image sees the loadmaster finally waving the buses away, 'making authoritative motions *long after there is any necessity for it*' (D 100, italics mine).

Busing of course is as explicit a contemporary reference as Dunkirk is a historical one. Both are *present causes* in the text: events whose self-apparent familiarity is subsequently destabilised by the indeterminate circuits of definition around them: departure – surrender –

retreat – removal – deracination. But those contested *present causes* activate a prismatic quality in the story, illuminating connections with *absent causes* elsewhere and conjoining them too into an intensity of political debate.

Consider the following patchwork of allusions. Forced busing bumps up against a military extermination programme, with sinister chemicals and racial overtones, ‘to freeze to death three million or so *blackbirds*’ (D 98, italics mine). The national status of the military is then refracted through references to patriotism (‘Defense Bond’), avoiding conscription (‘running away from home [...] This was in Texas, during the War’), and protesting ex-soldiers (‘What is the point of all this misery? I am a voter! I am a veteran!’) (D 97,107). Then the military use of chemicals is rendered allusively topical by a reference to Randy Newman’s ‘Let’s Burn Down the Cornfield’, whose lyrics capture the eroticism and destruction that combined in America’s strategy of deforestation in Vietnam (‘Let’s burn down the cornfield // And we can listen to it burn’) (D 104).³³ Finally the notions of military adventure and of departure (withdrawal/surrender) jostle inside a fusion of the contemporary with the historic, once again in the headline ‘**DUNKIRK**’.

These disparate allusions achieve tentative focus inside the story’s prism of inferred political intensities. The references to draft-dodging and to chemicals irresistibly invoke Vietnam as an absent cause. And they, in turn, connect with the controversies over busing, and the victory/defeat debate over Dunkirk, to suggest the adjacent crisis in national self-belief over ‘peace with honour’ vs. humiliating withdrawal (departure) into which the exceptionalist project in Vietnam had, by 1971, descended. Barthelme’s technique effectively contests the perceived limits of linguistic meaning, and denies words their ideological innocence: *departure* spins outward to conflate romantic rites-of-passage with divisive military expeditions, Hollywood farewells (the story’s final vignette suggests *An Affair to Remember* (1959), ‘I cannot image the future [...] What is the point of all this misery?’) with controversial social engineering, and even eugenics (D 107).

This complex of signification however expresses only one flow of activity through the story’s circuitry. Even as one set of references operates centrifugally, inferring a world in crisis beyond, so another set of references operates centripetally, proposing to resolve complexity into narrative, and crisis into belief. Indeed, as an *expression* of crisis the story’s force lies as much in its equivocation over the viability of sustainable mythologies and neat outcomes as it does in evoking irresolvable issues of political actuality.

³³ Randy Newman, ‘Let’s Burn Down the Cornfield’, on *12 Songs* (Reprise Records, 1970). [on CD]

In the longest vignette, a narrative voice *departs* into fantasy to relay a mythical story set in the American wilderness. The voice's grandfather, charged with supplying lumber for World War One barracks, arrives in East Texas where he encounters a sassy, shape-shifting, axe-wielding wood nymph whose mystical job it is 'to whack anybody who does any kind of thing inimical to the well-being and mental health of trees' (D 100). The two fall in love and agree a deal whereby the nymph will temporarily turn herself into the required lumber in return for the grandfather leaving the trees alone, and having sex 'interference of a physical nature', with her (D 102).

The story is, in part, an elaborately self-conscious take on American frontier mythology: the doughty ancestor confronting a mysterious 'other' but successfully prosecuting his national purpose. To that extent it is a *departure* from the complexities of real life: fairy-tale and adventure story combine to mythologise the mundane job of sourcing wartime lumber. And to that extent also, it operates as a form of relief from the disorientating discontinuities of the story's other sections: folk-stories allow debate to reach closure, differences to be reconciled, morals to be drawn.

But the section's final lines contest the impulse to mythologise: 'this is not really how it went. I am fantasising. Actually, he just plain cut down trees' (D 103). The effect of this punch-line reversal is manifold. It throws into metafictional relief any tendency to narrate and exceptionalise what might otherwise be unexceptional experiences and, consequently, subverts America's tendency to mythologise its national story: the nymph encounter satirises the errand into the wilderness and the tendency to translate contact with the West's 'other' into a transcendental tale of exceptionalist destiny. But, most critically, it amplifies the story's overall evocation of crisis. By so perfunctorily dismissing myth, by re-asserting prosaic fact over the solace of fantasy, the punch-line emphatically foregrounds the resistance to narrative containment in the story's references elsewhere. It pronounces a tension between a disconcertingly problematized political world and a desire for idealised solutions, and the latter's enervating failure to ameliorate the former.

'Departures' explicitly pronounces its discontinuities but is simultaneously not content to allow its fragmentation of language to simply linger. It juxtaposes different fields of discourse – historical, journalistic, scientific, mythological – and encourages each to interrogate the other, exploring contestations in the political world beyond by provoking confrontations, and prompting connections, between discrete circuits of reference. A Vietnam of angry veterans and Agent Orange is thus never far from mythical tales of frontier endeavour; busing might be as risky an intervention into the body politic as surgery is a risky

intervention into the body physical. So perceived, the story expresses in form and reference both the precarious narratives and the divisive debates in its adjacent circumstances.

5.2.2. In The Zone: 'The Indian Uprising'.

In 'The Indian Uprising' (1965), Barthelme effects an ontological shift: the suburbs become a zone of intense social crisis, collapsing complacency and diminishing reassurance. 'Do you think this is a good life?' the narrator asks, 'No' his partner Sylvia replies as, variously, a love affair disintegrates, time spent on the analyst's couch culminates in the dead-end diagnosis of 'you know nothing [...] you are locked in a most savage and terrible ignorance' and security buckles as 'the arrows of the Comanches came in clouds'.³⁴ The story's opening line, 'we defended the city as best we could', suggests a contested space whose systems of organisation and belief are unravelling even as its citizens fight to maintain them (*TIU* 10).

'Uprising' presents as a jarring aggregation of discontinuities. At one point an account of torture ('two of us forced [the captured Comanche's] head back, while another poured water into his nostrils') drifts disconcertingly into a salon discussion about high culture, 'Do you know Fauré's 'Dolly'?' (*TIU* 10-11). But the story's politics are not confined to a satirical inscription of bourgeois insouciance where, for example, the narrator obsesses about making D.I.Y. tables from 'hollow-core door[s]' for his lovers while heroin pours 'into the ghetto' and 'muck [runs] in the gutters' (*TIU* 11,13). Rather, the story's fragmentary references and allusions suggest a sedimentary layer deposited by grand structures of mythology and ideology which are now fracturing. Images of disintegration connect Barthelme's city-under-siege with the political stresses of Vietnam abroad and urban unrest at home and wrap both into the contestations inside, and ultimate reversal of, foundational narratives: the Indians are finally rising up after 'the act of genocide with which our nation began', the battle between 'savagery' and perceived 'civilisation' at the national frontier.³⁵

To the extent that 'Uprising' creates an ontological zone to inscribe an America at war on multiple fronts, it is useful to examine how the zone's geography captures the different conditions which combine into its contemporary cartography of crisis. Consider the barricades assembled against Indian attack:

³⁴ Donald Barthelme, 'The Indian Uprising', in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), pp.9-19 (pp.10,12). Hereafter *TIU*.

³⁵ Fiedler, p.71.

Window dummies, silk, thoughtfully planned job descriptions (including scales for the orderly progress of other colours) wine in demijohns and robes [...] a red pillow and a blue pillow [...] a Yugoslavian carved flute, wood, dark brown. (*TIU* 11-12)

These random piles suggest a culture whose contemporary achievements have eventuated in ad hoc taxonomies of largely useless commodities, and whose processes of self-examination have arrived at a cul-de-sac: the narrator 'analysed the composition of the barricade nearest [him/her]' but finds only more objects, 'two ash trays, ceramic, one dark brown', rather than reassurance, 'I decided I knew nothing' (*TIU* 11-12).

The sense that the city is predicating its defence on a precarious faith in cultural achievement is underlined by a map which positions it at the unstable limits of national expansion and self-assured exceptionalism. Streets are named after military leaders who secured the American Century: 'George C. Marshall Allée' in memory of the aid plan that secured U.S. influence in Cold War Europe; 'Rue Chester Nimitz' after the Admiral who commanded the Pacific Fleet in World War Two (*TIU* 14,13). And yet, for all its myths of military glory, the city now risks being overwhelmed, 'Red men [come] in waves', and is internally divided, 'instead of resisting [...] the people of the ghetto [...] had joined the smooth, well-coordinated attack' (*TIU* 11,13). The city's military operates under the flag of exceptionalism, 'the Abraham Lincoln Brigade', but its operations recall the U.S. in Vietnam where protesters accused the administration of disproportionately applying high technology to the annihilation of peasants:

We killed a great many in the south suddenly with helicopters and rockets but we found that those who had been killed were children and more came from the north and from the east and from other places where there are children preparing to live. (*TIU* 17,19)

The cumulative impression is of an unstable construction of contested purposes, a city-zone built on America's ailing mythologies. The myth of success becomes an accumulation of meaningless commodities where, facing deteriorating conditions, the narrator plaintively attempts to use his tawdry D.I.Y. as a rallying point: 'See the table?' he asks several times, 'people all over America have made such tables' (*TIU* 15). The myth of exceptionalism becomes an expression of exhaustion, 'the men in charge of the Uprising refused [...] to understand that it was real and[...] that our credit was no longer what it had been, once' (*TIU* 17). And the frontier myth goes into reverse: it is now the 'civilised' with their 'apples, books and long-playing records' who 'attach wires to the testicles of the captured Comanches', and it

is the marginalised 'savage' Indians who are now 'the rolling consensus', redirecting history as they 'smash [...] our inner defences on three sides' (*TIU* 10,17,18).

Indeed, there is a sense that the entire story imagines an America which has arrived at a terminal crisis: narratively chaotic, delegitimised, returned to the bare space of its founding. In this, the narrator's detachment ('I sat there getting drunker and drunker and more in love and more in love') extends beyond casual insouciance and into an ironic implication in a break-down of his own making (*TIU* 11). Mid-uprising, he announces to Sylvia 'it is when I am with you that I am happiest and it is for you that I am making this hollow-core door table' as if his solipsism is a refuge from, as opposed to a cause of, the surrounding deterioration (*TIU* 13). Sylvia however has already joined the counterculture: she wears a modish Comanche 'bear claw necklace' and disappears 'down the Rue Chester Nimitz, uttering shrill cries': 'with luck', she threatens, 'you will survive until matins' (*TIU* 13).

The 60s, Lytle writes, were defined by the 'infinitely compound manner [in which] society broke along generational, racial, class, ethnic, regional, ideological, aesthetic, and gender lines'.³⁶ And to that extent, 'Uprising's' fractured juxtapositions are a periodic expression of contested designation: fashionable girls hide 'Comanches in their rooms'; a captured Comanche identifies himself as 'Gustave Aschenbach', Mann's conflicted protagonist in *Death in Venice* (*TIU* 16,17). Barthelme's key political intervention however is to locate these disorientations inside the mythical traditions on which America has hitherto relied: the city operates as a zone where underlying contestations are made flesh. In the story's final image, stability shatters as the displaced deceits inside a foundational story rise up in accusation: 'I removed my belt and shoelaces and looked (rain shattering from a great height the prospects of silence and clear, neat rows of houses in the subdivisions) into their savage black eyes, paint, feathers, beads' (*TIU* 19). In a near apocalyptic expression of crisis, the solipsistic narrator is suspended between life and death (it is not clear whether the belt is removed to prevent suicide, or to hang him) as a sepulchral storm is poised to destroy the suburbs.

Absent from, but irresistibly inferred by, 'Uprising's' 'time of Endings' is the hope of redemption.³⁷ Barthelme will tackle the issue of hoped-for outcomes in his novels. But the contested politics of redemptive myth-making are the subject of his most celebrated short story.

³⁶ Lytle, p.x.

³⁷ Fiedler, p.83

5.2.3. Metafictional Construction: 'Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning'.

'Robert Kennedy' is a metafictional engagement with the narrativisation of political life, and the construction of political personality. Kennedy's assassination in June 1968, two months after publication, was a dark realisation of the fiction's interventionist speculation on the degree to which its eponymous subject was a form of blank canvas onto which the American public – and ultimately even a gunman – might choose to project their own meanings. So perceived, Barthelme deliberately plays on the *a priori* name recognition that attached to Robert Kennedy during the politically intense mid-60s. First, as heir to his older brother's interrupted Camelot, and second as the architect of civil rights who would rescue progressive politics from Nixon's planned dismantling of the New Deal consensus. The story, however, deliberately strips Kennedy of his ideological specificities, presenting the would-be president as an amalgam of commodified trademark and uncategorised mythical hope. The story's twenty-four vignettes develop a series of centrifugal narratives around what is ultimately an ill-defined, even absent, subject. Kennedy emerges as a portmanteau solution to his period's disparate disorientations: perceived as an intimate friend to some, a political Mr. Fixit to others, and – in the final vignette – perhaps a mythical superhero to all.

Klinkowitz reads the story as 'a conventional epistemology'.³⁸ Maltby detects a collage of media reports which cheapen 'the perception of politicians [as they are] mediated through channels of public information which are unreliable, superficial, and trivializing'.³⁹ It is both, and neither. While specific knowledge of Kennedy might elude us, his historical presence *around* the story persists nonetheless, even if it, or his, effective meaning is unclear. And although meanings might be media-created, they are as much a response to public appetites as they are to proprietorial agendas.

Read as a metafiction however the epistemological vagueness, and any media critique, are subsumed into a gross realisation of an ultimate predilection for reassuring political trajectory. It is not only Kennedy who is saved from drowning in the story (if drowning infers, as Klinkowitz suggests, the buffeting conjectures of public perception), it is also Kennedy's public who find in him a narrative site for their own periodic hopes of outcome: what Barthelme calls America's political *folie à deux*.

³⁸ Klinkowitz, *Disruptions*, p.69.

³⁹ Maltby, p.52.

The drive towards narrative determination – and its near-simultaneous interrogation – develop in layers. The first clusters around the story's only consistent point-of-return: Barthelme's displacement of headline name recognition into a single initial.

The designation 'K.' is variously and simultaneously metafictional, intimate, commercial and (quasi-) mythical.⁴⁰ First, it suggests familiarity: K. as a cosy diminutive, and campaigning expedient, inferring that he and the reader/voter are in this *together*, conjoined on personal terms. Second, trademark, like K for Kellogg's: an American dynasty, a political inheritance distilled into an electable brand. Third, K. as Kafka's everyman, buffeted like his public by disorientating forces (not least the conspiracy stories surrounding his brother). In combination, 'K.' signifies both absence and richly seductive construct: commodification and celebrity proffer mythical inheritance and notions of narrative stability on the one hand, while evading the destabilising vagaries of discrete personality on the other.

So perceived, much of the text – its second layer – equivocates between known and unknown, or more specifically perhaps the *assumed* knowledge of projected meaning, and hoped-for outcomes.

From the opening line, K. is hard to pin down. 'He is neither abrupt with nor excessively kind to associates. Or he is both abrupt and kind' (RK 40). And the story's vignettes initially present as tantalising attempts at characterising the man beyond. In 'Gallery-going', he demonstrates down-to-earth humour before an artist's 'immense, rather theoretical paintings': 'Well, at least we know he has a ruler' (RK 73). Elsewhere, a former teacher offers a politically seductive childhood memory, 'what was unusual about K. was his compassion, something very rare for a boy of that age' (RK 49).

What is being offered here are centrifugal fragments. But they also register as component parts that might potentially coalesce into publicly and politically convenient narratives. This metafictional tension underscores vignettes whose evidential omissions are nonetheless corralled to support manifold claims to legitimacy. In 'Described by Secretaries', for example, K. oscillates contradictively between the endearingly human – 'Quite frankly I think he forgets a lot of things', says secretary A – and the proto-presidential: 'he has the ability to get rid of unimportant details. And he does', says secretary B (RK 41). And when secretary B is in hospital and K. delivers 'the biggest bunch of yellow tulips I'd ever seen in my life', both agendas benefit: the candidate shows generosity, the secretary acquires prestige. Elsewhere, 'A Friend Comments on K.'s aloneness' and notes that 'maybe it comes from

⁴⁰ Donald Barthelme, 'Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning', in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), pp.39-53 (p.40). Hereafter RK.

something in his childhood' (RK 46). Vague speculation blends into a narrative of political continuity by inferring, as absent cause, the so-called Kennedy curse which killed RFK's oldest brother in 1943, as well as the assassinated president in 1963.

The story's play between elusiveness and projection – and the impulse towards narrative outcomes that mediates between the two – is thrown into sharp, self-consciously theoretical, relief by a third layer. Vignette 23, *'He Discusses the French Writer, Poulet'*, foregrounds the possibility that K.'s strategy is a deliberate political seduction (RK 52).

In a pronounced metafictional intervention, we are offered the critic Poulet's observation that the distinctive character in Marivaux 'has in a sense no history'. He is 'a pastless futureless man, born anew in at every instant' and while the instants may appear to 'organise themselves into a line', any consequent inference of narrative cause-and-effect is displaced by the contingency of the moment, 'what is important is not the line, but the instant'. In part, this formulation highlights a general metafictional slipperiness in the surrounding text. But it must also be read for the specific construction of the fictional Marivaudian character Poulet identifies.

Thus, first, the privileged 'instant which lives and dies' also contains 'an intensity and depth of significance which ordinarily attaches only to whole of existence'. The contingent moment, this suggests, always and already contains some greater sense of destiny or purpose. And then later, the Marivaudian man 'is constantly being taken over by events [...] in consequence he exists in a certain freshness which seems, if I may say so, very desirable'. The ability, it appears, to respond flexibly to contingency is a mark of distinction. Quite who is speaking during this knot of observations is unclear. The *'He'* and the *'I'* may be the writer, or K., or both. Whichever way, it creates a site of correspondence between fictional self-consciousness and political strategy. The political character is able, the passage suggests, to deploy the room-for-manoeuve of elusiveness at the same time as offering the reassurances of underlying purpose, channelling both into the leadership pragmatics of being able to cope with unpredictable events. The K. who reacts to 'terrible statistics' and announces 'We must do something', whereby 'important actions often follow, sometimes within a matter of hours' is both inside and outside of proscription, able to manoeuvre generatively between both; 'on the other hand', the text alerts us, 'these two kinds of responses may be, on a given day, inexplicably reversed' (RK 42).

K. becomes, reassuringly or manipulatively, all things to all people. Empty position statements ('the world is full of unsolved problems that demand careful, reasoned and intelligent action') and meaningless gestures ('obsolete facilities and growing demands have

created seemingly impossible difficulties and present methods of dealing with these difficulties offer little prospect of relief') acquire the shape of political competence when their rhetoric is reframed by the mythologies the candidate acquires or inculcates (*RK* 51,44).

An eventual sense that K.'s flexibility of definition might be expedient is distilled into the story's final vignette (*RK* 53). K. is 'in the water'. His semi-mythical trappings, 'his flat black hat, his black cape, his sword' – suggesting anything from a romance knight to Zorro – 'are on the shore'. There is no chronology here. Whether he has abandoned his costume, or is swimming towards it, is unclear. What is clear is an attempt to conceal identity: 'he retains his mask', although whether he is in hiding or a superhero remains ambiguous. In short, K. is suspended between multiple personae and multiple trajectories, possibly drowning, possibly swimming, possibly just treading water: 'his hands beat the surface of the water which tears and rips around him'. By throwing K. a line it is the nominal narrator, and not the candidate, who proposes an ending to what is otherwise an indeterminate situation, effectively casting the ambiguous K. as the object in a narrative where he, the rescuer, is now the subject, 'rope around my waist, braced against a rock'.

In this last paragraph reversal, Barthelme appears to remind us of our complicity in the construction of the stories we subscribe to: the political candidate is less a coherent personality than a collection of parts which we then combine into our own privileged narratives, extracting him as it were from a chaotic sea of possibilities into the safety of mutual re-assurance. So perceived, the story's final words, K.'s 'thank you' hover suspensively between a registration of life-saving gratitude and the simple of acknowledgement of contact, and another vote.

In these three stories, Barthelme lays down co-ordinates for an interplay between postmodernist forms and an adjacent political culture. Fragmentation, world-building and metafiction both produce and contest systems of meaning-making which go on, via references to Vietnam, to the West and to presidents, to invoke and contest adjacent systems of belief. In this, Barthelme consistently equivocates over the possibility of narrative outcome. His novels however suggest that the grand mythical structures that might promise outcomes are themselves now too contested to deliver anything other than political illusions, and enduring crisis.

5.3. Snow White.

Snow White tackles personal ambitions of self-fulfilment, collective ambitions towards stability and trajectory, and the politics of promised outcomes predicated on mythical visions. The novel actively contests whether anxieties can be displaced by the reassurance of narrative in a mid-60s U.S. where 'Americans will not or cannot see themselves as princely', which is not 'civilised enough to supply the correct ending to the story', and where individuals 'can never be satisfied' and descend into 'a crisis of confidence'.⁴¹ The novel's textual techniques meanwhile, its pronounced metafictional negotiation with versions of the fairy tale in Grimm and Disney, its 'linguistic trip stutter and fall', inscribe a climate of precarious poise, caught uneasily between the attractions of new possibility, and the narrative recursions that represent a response to disorientation (SW 145).

Central to this chapter's reading of *Snow White* as a political meditation on an America about to enter the Nixon Years are two episodes at the text's very mid-point. The first, frequently highlighted in commentary, is a questionnaire, in part mocking the 60s appetite for market research.⁴² The second, rarely analysed, is an intervention by 'the President' himself. The juxtaposition of the two promotes a connection between the novel's internal textual play on narrative construction and an external politics of promised outcomes.

The questionnaire foregrounds the novel's metafictional aspects (SW 88-9). It interrogates whether the reader has understood the novel's self-conscious and self-evident antecedence:

3. Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure? Yes () No ()

But in the very process of posing questions, the questionnaire simultaneously exposes a drift between the inherited familiarity with the fairy-tale narrative, and its contemporary iteration:

2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember? Yes () No ()

And as the questionnaire proceeds, so the gap widens between the text's internal concerns with the story it may – or may not – be referencing and the complexities of the real world beyond:

⁴¹ Donald Barthelme, *Snow White* (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996), pp.147,138,159,150. Hereafter SW.

⁴² See, for example: Gordon, p.82; Robert A. Morace, 'Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*: The Novel, the Critics and the Culture', *Critique*, 26 (1984), 1-10 (p.7).

8. Would you like a war? Yes () No ()
 9. Has the work, for you, a metaphysical dimension? Yes () No ().

The questionnaire's effect is to throw into critical relief the predictable reassurances of fictions in the face of a real world which may permit anything but. Finding metaphysical interpretations, or placing books 'on a scale of one to ten' creates an illusion of control in a world where existential choices ('Would you like a war?') depart one's grasp. America *was* at war in 1967, like it or not.

Set alongside the questionnaire, the President episode extends the issues of control and complexity, and of the precariousness of narrative constructions that might intervene, into national politics (SW 87). Looking out from an aloof White House, 'over this green lawn, and those fine rosebushes', the President detects that all is 'not well' with America, 'the falling Dow Jones index and the screams of the poor', and the characters in the novel who are its citizens: 'I worry about Bill, Hubert, Henry, Kevin, Edward Clem, Dan and their lover, Snow White.' In what reads like a televised address to the nation, the President asserts that worrying about a problem is tantamount to solving it:

Because I am President. Finally. The President of the whole fucking county.
 And they are Americans. Bill, Hubert [...] and Snow White. They are
 Americans. My Americans.

The suggestion seems to be that, *as* Americans, President and citizens are conjoined in a rhetorical myth of nationhood, a shared narrative which infers a birthright of providential outcomes. What the solutions to the national malaise might be, however, the President does not specify.

These two episodes function as tentative organising principles for what is otherwise an episodic and fragmentary text. In concert, they encourage the reader to detect in its constituent parts two forms of discourse operating simultaneously. In the characters' self-conscious assumption of fairy-tale roles, and aspirations towards fairy-tale outcomes, there is a coincident invocation of the political narratives which, drawing on national mythologies, proffer fairy-tale solutions to real world anxieties. In the novel's last act reversal in a deeply buried structure which combines the formal constructions of both Grimm and of Disney's Hollywood, there is the invocation of real-world contingencies that ultimately challenge predictive narrative control, and political projects. And in the novel's serial accounts of unfulfilled dreams and unrealised possibility – Snow White's prince never comes, he remains '*pure frog*' and dies defeated – there is a corresponding invocation of a society on the cusp of change which descends instead into crisis (SW 175).

5.3.1. The Fairy Tale and the Contemporary.

For all their fairy-tale or mythical patina, *Snow White's* characters are ultimately mundane figures, inextricably caught up in the dynamics of a particular time and place. Snow White herself is, on first encounter, a drudge: a housewife-cum-'horsewife' who divides her time between meticulous housework, and servicing the seven men (SW 49). Paul, the putative prince, is an unemployed artist whose work is 'sublimely poor' (SW 55). The wicked stepmother Jane is a spinster who was 'fair once' but has seen 'better days', and who now finds solace as the 'sleepie' of the town's most notorious bad boy (SW 46). Hogo de Bergerac, the 'loathsome' bad boy himself, is a petty criminal who lives amid junk, 'with Pontiac convertible seats for chairs' (SW 133).

The seven men meanwhile (dwarfs only perhaps in their lack of distinction) are 'simple bourgeois' who seem to have emerged from the quiet affluence of a consensual 1950s (SW 93). They prize lives 'stuffed with equanimity', 'have voted again and again', and have grown rich during the post-war boom by manufacturing exotic Chinese baby food, and washing down the high-rises 'gray and noble in their false architecture and cladding' of postmodern urban development (SW 93,21,14). Their world is one where 'a river of girls' flood the streets 'trying to find the right typewriter in the correct building' in images that recall the serried offices of Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960) and where the foundational American work ethic is the key to exceptionalist progress: 'clean buildings fill your eyes with sunlight, and your heart with ideas that men is perfectible' (SW 21,14). They see themselves as emblematic of an American citizenry that is realising its mythic new world opportunities:

We were all born in National Parks. Clem has his memories of Yosemite, inspiring gorges. Kevin remembers the Great Smokies. Henry has his Arcadian songs and dances. Dan his burns from Hot Springs. Hubert has claimed the giant red, and Edward has climbed stately Rainier. And I [Bill their leader is speaking], I know the Everglades [...] These common experiences have yoked us together forever in the red, white and blue. (SW 68)

Society however is changing and *Snow White's* world is poised between affluent self-assurance and emerging instability. Signs appear saying '*Kill the Rich*'; in Chicago, Clem encounters a counterculture of 'children freaking out in their Army surplus'; the seven men ponder whether 'it is unbearable, this consensus, this damned felicity' and tentatively embrace civil strife, 'when I see a couple fighting I give them a dollar, because fighting is interesting. Thank God for fighting' (SW 72,28,73).

The novel is pitched therefore against of a backdrop of disorientation where America is exploring the progressive logic of its own mythical narratives. Its apparent circumstances infer the dualities in Kennedy's New Frontier. On the one hand there is the pronounced attachment to mythically charged foundational ideas and the revivification of the national story. On the other, there is a concomitant sense of the disruption the Frontier narrative unleashed as the 60s progressed.

Thus, and most clearly, Snow White herself is poised precariously between the familiar and the forward-looking; between the roles assigned by a receding consensus, and a room-for-manoeuve afforded by an emerging social dynamic. '*Miseries and complaints of Snow White*', reads one of the novel's collage-style chapters, 'I am tired of just being a horsewife!' (SW 49). In a metaphor that captures how the imaginative opportunities of the 60s were made possible in part by the affluence of the 50s, Snow White notes that 'like the long-sleeping stock suddenly alive in its green safety-deposit box because of new investor interest, my imagination is stirring' after years of 'not [being] able to imagine anything better' (SW 65-6). The metaphor's tortuousness notwithstanding, it heralds an effort to find 'some words in the world that were not the words I always hear': Snow White has started to write 'a dirty great poem four pages long' (SW 12,16). She balks at her psychiatrist's suggestion that she is 'uninteresting [...] a screaming bore' (SW 27). She has repudiated sexual roles based on movie versions of national tradition and has 'taken to wearing the heavy blue bulky shapeless People's Volunteers trousers rather than the tight tremendous how-the-West-was-won trousers she formerly wore' (SW 22). She is increasingly reluctant to subsume her sexuality into servicing the seven men who have adopted her.

Gordon suggests this restlessness positions Snow White as 'the young woman of the early sixties', locked into a 'rut' of modish roles, whose story will be one of seeking 'a real liberation' where she attempts to create, or write, her own identity beyond contemporary stereotypes.⁴³ This however is to privilege the localised satire in Barthelme's characterisation (and *characterisations*) over the degree to which they foreground a more complex conversation with the novel's equally pronounced metafictional strategies. In this, Barthelme inscribes a disorientating double-bind where Snow White's search for new possibilities is prompted by the opportunities proposed by inherited, mythical narratives but where those narratives simultaneously create expectations the real world is unlikely to fulfil. In short, Snow White risks being held captive by the very American story that has come to define her as a restless child of the New Frontier 60s.

⁴³ Gordon, pp.62-3.

Thus, Snow White benefits from the rise in educational opportunity which, by the early 60s, saw university degrees for women grow faster than those for men. She creates room for manoeuvre by studying '*Modern Woman, Her Privileges and Responsibilities*' at the emphatically feminist, liberal arts 'Beaver College' and learns how 'the nature and nurture of women [...] contribute to the rehumanizing of today's world' alongside the modish acquisition of '*Personal Resources*' which include 'opening and using the mind [...] mature redefinition of goals, action projects' (SW 31).

There is an incipient crisis however in the level of expectation this exposure to liberating ideas creates, predicated as it is on access to the social products of an affluent consensus she now feels inspired to protest. Snow White is beset by '*vacillations and confusions*', she worries that 'the earth' has become a 'ball of half truths' which still needs '*real men*', as we know them from the films and from our childhood, when there were giants on the earth' (SW 18,48). By asking 'But who am I to love?' while simultaneously repeating a Disney lyric 'Someday my prince will come', she asserts her capacity for manoeuvre but cannot resist implication in a popular narrative of continued expectation which has historically required mythical celluloid princes to propel it (SW 18,75). At another point, Snow White lists the idealised princes she might choose *from*, combining figures from American comic books, 'Prince Valiant', versions of Shakespeare, 'Prince Fortinbras', and contemporary monarchy, 'Prince Akihito', only to descend into a near crisis of managing choice and expectation:

Well it is terrific to be anticipating a prince – to be waiting and knowing that what you are waiting for is a prince, packed with grace – but it is still waiting, and waiting as a mode of existence is [...] a darksome mode. I would rather be doing a hundred other things. (SW 83)

Snow White embodies therefore, and the other characters exist inside, an American mid-60s whose social dynamics are changing but which simultaneously cannot escape the narrative determinations of its foundational ideas. They have inherited a national belief that dreams can be realised, but have to negotiate a volatility which may forbid the delivery of providential outcomes.

The implications of this conundrum are explored, first, in the novel's metafictional engagement with its own source materials and, second, in the experience of the seven men whose story registers the fall-out of a periodic crisis in expectation.

5.3.2. Mythical Promotions and Mythical Frustrations.

Snow White is structured in three parts, or acts, rather like a Hollywood screenplay. This metafictional intervention, in itself, promotes expectations of satisfying outcome while simultaneously exposing a fictiveness in any reconciliation of complexity through carefully mapped plot-points.

Thus, in the end-of-act-one inciting incident, the vacillating Snow White accepts her 'cinematic' mission by refusing to 'let it, this waiting, bring down [her] lofty feelings of anticipation': she lets 'down her hair black as ebony from the window' in the hope a prince will save her (SW 83,86). In act two, Snow White encounters obstacles in her mission as no-one takes up her mythical challenge and Paul, the favoured candidate, disappears overseas in a failed attempt to demonstrate his virtue. But in the third act, in a reversal of the climax moment of Disney or Grimm, it is the would-be prince who takes the fatal poison, leaving Snow White without 'true love's kiss'.

At the plot level therefore Barthelme's novel invokes both the characters and the trusted cinematic structure of its Hollywood antecedent and then contests the sustainability, and conclusive morality, of its determination. Here the wicked stepmother, Jane, is neither chased off a cliff nor condemned, in a reference to Grimm, to die dancing in 'red-hot iron shoes' (SW 116). She escapes instead, it appears, to subvert more stories in the future:

"Look how he has fallen to the ground Jane!" Snow White observed [...] Why it resembles nothing else but a death agony, the whole scene. I wonder if there was something wrong with that drink after all? Jane? Jane?" (SW 181)

This plot violation, however, is the limit neither of the novel's contestation of received fictional forms, nor of its destabilisation of promised political outcomes. Rather the subverting of Disney and Grimm – heroes fail, villains survive – creates a gross context within which Barthelme interrogates a collection of interpenetrating stories and systems of belief which, first, conjoin into a sense of collective, near mystical, aspiration before, second, tumbling into an eventual crisis of contradiction. So when the novel, towards the end of act one, describes its heroine's motivating hopes and dreams as an '*irruption of the magical in the life of Snow White*', the subsequent fairy-tale allusions – 'a bear transformed into a king's son [...] a crystal casket in which there is a cap that makes the wearer invisible' – create a climate of magical thinking, and an (illusory) expectation of magical outcomes (SW 76).

Most obviously, Barthelme's Snow White is also the Grimms' Rapunzel and therefore joins a tradition of trapped heroines, from Andromeda to Daisy Buchanan, whose putative

'incompleteness' requires princely rescue (SW 76). The expedient of letting down one's hair, we are reminded, 'is a very ancient one [...] found in many cultures, in various forms' and proposes a point of correspondence where fairy tale, myth, and popular cultural storytelling coincide (SW 86). Elsewhere Jane, trapped with her mother, will imagine herself as Jane from a Tarzan movie, 'swing[-ing] from the lianas that dangle from the Meat Street trees' or, in her rivalry with Snow White, as the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz* (novel and film) complete with flying ape 'familiar' (SW 38,113).

The novel's amalgam of myth and fairy tale encodes the degree to which its anxious characters seek to escape into magical thinking, but simultaneously the degree to which escape is limited to the performing of roles against prescribed outcomes. They are, we are consistently reminded, mundane individuals despite their magical convictions. In this, Barthelme fuses together metafictional construction with inferences of psychological and cultural imperatives which in turn blur the line between fictional narratives and socio-political projects.

Thus, for example, the Paul who attends 'the Unemployment Office' and who feels 'down' in his small apartment, is able to 'pump [him-]self up again' by asserting that his blood is 'the bluest this fading world has known probably' (SW 19,33). All he needs to fulfil his 'loftier ambitions' is to ride away with 'some beauty who needs me [...] flung over the pommel of my palfrey' (SW 33). Critically Paul's narrative blends fairy-tale chivalry with American mythology, foundational and popular cultural. Paul's princely self-regard, 'Paul stood before a fence posing', which might put him 'on television', is an extension of the heroic persona that once secured America's western frontier (SW 84). 'If I had been born well prior to 1900', he says 'I could have ridden with Pershing against Pancho Villa', referring to the Mexican Revolution that threatened the U.S.'s borders before World War One. He imagines himself being painted by Pete Hurd whose real-life work memorialised western landscapes and President Johnson, and by Tom Lea whose pictures valorised both cowboys and American soldiers. Paul's downtrodden need to ennoble himself fuses fairy tale with grand mythologies of American national definition.

Barthelme attaches a similar breadth of reference to Snow White, whose self-assigned role is contextualised, in part, by psychological need and frustrated self-image. In a series of headlined interventions, the text invites speculation on the degree to which the fairy-tale outcome Snow White plans for herself is a proxy narrative for her deepest anxieties. Thus, in one instance, **'THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SNOW WHITE'** lists her **'FEARS'** as **'MIRRORS | APPLES**

| **POISONED COMBS**'; and in another she **'REMEMBERS | THE HUNTSMAN | THE FOREST | THE STEAMING KNIFE'** (SW 23,45).

What Barthelme inscribes here, in this collection of references, is a manifold mythological impulse. To the extent his characters inhabit a version of New Frontier America, these collaged stories – fairy tales, legends, Westerns – suggest the mythical modes by which they might navigate anxiety or realise opportunity amid contemporary change. As another of the headlines suggests, in an allusion to Keats, Shelley and Byron, Snow White and Paul are heirs, or perceive themselves heirs, to **'THE SECOND GENERATION OF ENGLISH ROMANTICS'** who, confronted with **'THE EVILS OF INDUSTRIALISM AND POLITICAL REPRESSION'**, escape into **'HEROISM | ART | SPIRITUAL TRANSCENDENCE'** (SW 30). 'My imagination is stirring' warns Snow White; 'what is the next thing demanded of me by history?' says Paul, grandly (SW 61).

Critically, however, any sense of mythic trajectory is already unstable at the point of utterance. The ultimate violation in the novel's grand metafictional structure, wherein the prince never comes, also contains a series of incremental contestations to each of its mythical assertions. For example, the prior versions of Snow White herself privilege, before their happy endings, the very down-to-earth 'horsewife' labour that Barthelme's Snow White rejects. In Grimm, the heroine is given shelter in return for housework. In Disney's version, labour is promoted in several celebrated musical sequences. That Snow White, the emancipated woman from Beaver College, still needs as part of her mythical inheritance and *'psychology'* a 'prince' to 'complete' her is a stark indicator that the novel's characters are caught somewhere between the novelty of contemporary aspiration and a retroactive inertia (SW 76).

The sense of contestation, however, is at its most pronounced in what is effectively the novel-as-movie's turning-point, and salient action. In a series of episodes, Barthelme describes *'reaction[s] to the hair'* Snow White lets down. And in each, the reactions circle down into stasis as the mythical appeal is applauded as a gesture, but repudiated as a basis for action. Fred 'the rock-and-roll band leader' is 'changed' and encourages his bandmates to 'revise their lives upward' by granting them the freedom 'to play the buffalo music of [their] forefathers rather than the rock-and-roll we have patented [...] and been paid for' (SW 96-7). The mention of 'buffalo music', and later 'where have the buffalo gone' – references to the white settlers' eradication of the bison which led to the decimation of the Indians – infers contemporary social protest as well as a revisiting of frontier mythology. Fred's bandmates however will have none of it, 'we are tired of having for a leader one who is nothing else than a damned fool' and report him to their union. In another episode, two old men decide to leave

the hair to 'a Paul or Paul-figure' and to concentrate on finding work instead, 'we have a duty to our families and to the country's merchant fleet' (SW 95). Paul himself meanwhile finds the 'hair black as ebony' makes him 'terribly nervous' and, sitting in his 'baff', worries that a heroic gesture will lead to the practicalities of marriage, 'teeth ... piano lessons' (SW 100).

In a series of sketches that record mundane rejections of a signal mythical gesture therefore Barthelme suggests the fault-lines in a culture which is looking for narrative trajectory on the one hand, but reluctant to act on its logic on the other. In an '*additional reaction [...] to the hair*', Edward, one of the seven men, goes even further, rejecting Snow White's aspirations entirely and advocating instead a reversion to a national status quo:

*The horsewife! The very base bone of the American plethora! The horsewife! Without whom the entire structure of civilian life would crumble. Without the horsewife, the whole *raison d'être* of our existence would be reduced [...] were it not for her enormous purchasing power and the heedless gaiety with which it is exercised, we would still be going round in skins probably, with no big ticket items to fill the empty voids, in our homes and in our hearts. (SW 105)*

In Snow White's and Paul's failure to perform their assumed roles as self-realising, mutually completing, princess and prince in a changing dispensation, the novel inscribes one aspect of incipient crisis. Both are ultimately circumscribed by, or fall victim to, a contradictory set of forces which promise mythical trajectory on the one hand but confine their room for manoeuvre to received narrative structures and prescribed outcomes on the other. So perceived, *Snow White* explores a society in nervous suspension, caught between past and future, unable to reconcile the contestations inside its mythical logic. And the inscription of crisis deepens when the novel's events are viewed from the perspective of the seven men who are the novel's emblematic, non-heroic, citizens of 'the red, white and blue'.

5.2.3. Middle American Anxiety.

In the novel's third act, Clem, one of the seven men, announces he is 'worried by the fact that no one responded to Snow White's hair initiative. Even though [he is] at the same time relieved. But it suggests that Americans will not or cannot see themselves as princely' (SW 146-7). The phrase summarises the novel's persistent sense of disorientation, and then attaches it to a sense of failed, political leadership. It suggests, on the one hand, that a great project has foundered on a cultural shortcoming, ultimate or periodic. The use of policy language, 'initiative', fuses together mythical and political outcomes; 'princely' captures both

an individual and a collective reluctance to realise mythical and political possibility. On the other hand, the word 'relieved' projects a simultaneous sense of recursion, a satisfaction perhaps that familiar conditions have survived unpredictable change.

To the extent Clem's verdict on the novel's core action, or *inaction*, is a love/hate one – equivocating between disruptive transformation and reassuring inertia – it foregrounds a sense of confusion in how the characters conceive periodic volatility should be managed. Even princeliness itself, Clem will debate later, may not be what America ultimately needs:

There is our long democratic tradition which is anti-aristocratic. Egalitarianism precludes princeliness. And yet our people are not equal in any sense. They are either ... The poorest of them are slaves as surely as if they were chained to gigantic wooden oars. The richest of them have the faces of cold effete homosexuals. *And those in the middle are wonderfully confused.* (SW 147, italics mine)

In the career of the seven men, in the experiences that bring them to this point of confusion and then beyond, the novel expresses the sense of a mid-60s American culture struggling with change, looking for trajectory but finding only a crisis of direction, and then finally descending into a potentially deeper crisis of repudiation and withdrawal. 'What gave us the idea there was something better?' the seven will conclude, mournfully (SW 185).

The experience of disorientation is contained first in the seven's relationship with Snow White. Where the Grimm and Disney versions are saintly heroines who attract the dwarves' devotion, Barthelme's politically aspirant version disrupts the stability of 'horse' work, and sexual availability, that is her part of the deal. Her demands for non-predictable language have left the seven 'sucking the mop again'; she is putting 'Chairman Mao poems in the baby food' they produce; they are all going 'round the bend' (SW 12,22,36). Where once they 'lived lives stuffed with equanimity', Snow White's arrival

has added a dimension of confusion and misery to [their] lives. Whereas once we were simple bourgeois who knew what to do, now we are complex bourgeois who are at a loss. We do not like this complexity [...] What is it? Is it, perhaps, *bad for business*? Equanimity has leaked away. (SW 93-4)

The stoicism of Grimm, and Disney's sentimentality, give way here to a form of conservative chippiness and barely enlightened self-interest. Barthelme's seven men, emblematic in many ways of a semi-professional middle class, mythologise their own adherence to the status quo. Snow White is there to serve their atavistic needs, 'men try to please their mistresses when they, men, are not busy in the counting house, or drinking healths, or having the blade of a new dagger chased with gold' (SW 21). And Snow White's self-assertion is a disruption to be managed. Thus they seek help from the loathsome Hogo

who advises them to dump her, 'you can always find a new one if you are willing to overlook certain weaknesses in the department of thoughts and feeling'; they try to deflect would-be prince Paul by stealing his typewriter; and when Snow White hangs her hair they dream of executing her in a scene from 'Dreyer's *The Burning of Joan of Arc*' (sic) or luring her back to sex-in-the-shower by acquiring a new shower curtain (SW 81,115).

The range of references Barthelme attaches to his seven men, set against the lofty but ultimately hidebound mythical aspirations of Snow White and Paul, expresses a broad climate of unfocussed social discontent. When the 'shower curtain initiative' fails to produce 'notable results', they return it to Bloomingdale's, hoping that a different one, another commodity, will make their lives better (SW 125). When an inspired figure enters their lives, Snow White/Joan of Arc, a nervous ambivalence between embrace and resentment leads to the contemplation of violence. They cannot decide whether they want Snow White's 'hair initiative' to succeed or fail; Paul is 'a beautiful human being', but in seeking to make him her prince Snow White is, conversely, 'nothing else but a goddamn degenerate' (SW 55,98).

In the politics of a novel that explores the role of heroic narratives in inspiring or responding to social change, the seven men register a corresponding disorientation. In 1969, Nixon would appeal to that same anxiety when he identified the 'silent majority' disconcerted by the fall-out from progressive policies earlier in the decade. And as in American life, so in Barthelme's novel, the issue of social turbulence turns on issues of leadership. Just as Americans looked to Kennedy and Johnson to explore a New Frontier and deliver a Great Society, and for Nixon to lead them out of the subsequent upheaval, so the seven men look to their own leader, Bill, to guarantee their own reassuring balance of material progress and stability: they are 'little children compared to him, in terms of possibility' (SW 26). Bill himself 'wanted to be great once [and] hoped to bring about a heightened awareness' but now the disruptive presence of Snow White has left him anxious, withdrawn and 'reluctant to be touched' (SW 57,10). He is less concerned with visionary leadership than with 'hold[-ing] the whole thing together': 'everything depends on me. I must conceal my wounds, contrive to appear unwounded' (SW 77).

The failure of mythical narratives to escape their own contestations is one expression of crisis in *Snow White*. The heady mixture of social disorientation and failing leadership is another. And the consequence of both, the novel suggests, is a bleak prognosis of chaotic withdrawal: a deeper crisis still. For the seven men, the failure of Snow White's 'hair initiative' and of their own 'shower-curtain initiative' are also failures of Bill's leadership initiative:

True leadership would make her love us fiercely and excitingly, as in the old days. True leadership would find a way to lead us out of this hairy imbroglio. I am tired of Bill's halting explanations, promises. If he does not want to lead, then let us vote. (SW 143)

What eventuates, however, is less a healthy application of America's democratic narrative and more a recourse to the sombre politics of recrimination. Privileging 'work, with its charts, its lines of authority, its air of importance', the seven men have come to resent any 'cow-hearted leader [who] spends the dreamy days eating cabbage, and watching ships' (SW 114). Bill is tried in a travesty of a court, confronted with 'inconclusive evidence of the worst sort' and ultimately hanged for 'vaticide and failure' for letting fires under the baby food vats go out (SW 169,186,170). The seven conclude that 'voting has turned out to be a damned impertinence. They never do what we want them to do anyway' and decide to 'go into the world and pull down all those election posters' (SW 152).

The career of *Snow White's* seven men moodily contests the mythology of an America, 'the red, white and blue', which prizes its democratic consensus and collective project of progress. Social disruption and a compromised idealism culminate in a perception that not only are Americans unwilling and unable to 'see themselves as princely' but that, more fundamentally, 'the quality of life in our great country [is] deprived': 'I suppose one could say that they are all lumpheads and let it go at that' says Clem (SW 146).

5.2.4. A Grim Prognosis.

In *Snow White's* final act, amid the despair of the heroine, the failure of the hero and the cynicism of the seven men, the President looks from his window again:

The Dow-Jones index was still falling. The folk were still in tatters. The President turned his mind for a millisecond to us here. "Great balls of river mud," the President said. "Is nothing going to go right?" (SW 162)

The satirical invocation of L.B.J. aside, the moment reminds us that the novel's metafictional strategies and narrative dilemmas are closely linked with a contemporary political climate: by 1967 the Johnson presidency was falling apart. Characters find themselves pursuing mythical trajectories – fairy-tale endings, magical promises – only to be frustrated by them. And all this in a social milieu which is itself optimistically promising change, while apparently delivering the opposite.

Thus, when *Snow White* condemns 'the world itself, for not being able to supply a prince. For not being able to at least be civilised enough to supply the correct ending to the

story', she is lamenting not only her diversion from her own mythical route, but enunciating also a deeper crisis of frustrated expectations (SW 138). In declaring, for example, that Paul is 'frog through and through', she underlines a sense of vertiginous confusion wherein, on the one hand, she expects a man to magically transform himself in order to complete her life's trajectory but where, on the other hand, contemporary developments provoke anger 'at male dominance of the physical world', even to the point of dictating the language ('If I could just get my hands on the man who called that piece of pipe a nipple!' she fumes) that underpinned the story-concluding power of the fairy-tale prince in the first place (SW 175,137). Elsewhere Snow White's sense of being trapped inside assumptions even as her perceived social mobility contests them extends into national mythology. In asking 'Where have the buffalo gone? You can go for miles and miles [...] without seeing a single one!', she alludes to the New Frontier vision of social advance and global leadership which was reluctant to acknowledge the savagery by which the old frontier had been secured (SW 137). Again, Snow White lays the blame first on male dominance, but her frustration at projects that stumble over their own ultimate contradictions extends outwards: 'That didn't prevent them from letting alienation seep in everywhere and cover everything like a big gray electric-blanket that doesn't work, after you have pushed the off-on switch to the 'on' position!' (SW 137).

In one respect therefore *Snow White's* sombre conclusion is that myths cannot escape their contestations and that narratives predicated on them will be violated. Paul reverts to being 'just another complacent bourgeois' and dies (SW 163). Loathsome Hogo wonders 'What is it that we can never be satisfied. It is almost as if we were designed that way'(SW 159). A voice towards the novel's end meanwhile ponders 'trying to break out of this bag that we are in. What gave us the idea there was something better? How does the concept, "something better," arise? What does it look like, this *something better*?' (SW 185).

By the mid-60s, when *Snow White* appeared, there was a pronounced sense that the 'something better' Americans had been promised had gone into reverse. 1967 itself saw the first use of chemical weapons in Vietnam and revelations that American high altitude bombers were killing civilians; the summer saw race riots in one hundred and twenty cities, sixty-nine people died; by July, President Johnson's approval ratings had fallen to 39%, an all-time low. 'Everything', as the novel suggests 'is falling apart' (SW 162). And within a year, Nixon would win the presidency by promising to insert himself into what was by now an electorally exploitable perception of crisis in America's mythical narrative: 'America is in trouble today not

because her people have failed but because her leaders have failed. And what America needs are leaders to match the greatness of her people'.⁴⁴

To the extent that *Snow White's* aggregated impression of narrative failure and systemic breakdown captures the symptomology of a topical climate of cultural and political crisis however, the novel also contains a tentative diagnosis of a deeper American malaise.

When Snow White worries about her overestimation of Paul, she also wonders whether in fact she has 'overestimated history' itself (SW 175). As ever the precise meaning is complex. She could be referring to an overweening belief in the inevitability of historical progress, or to a narrower set of American assumptions that its own particular history might contain specifically exceptionalist promises. Whichever way, the novel ends in a suggestion that its narrative crisis will not, in fact, be overcome but is doomed rather to repeat itself (SW 186-7). 'We prize equanimity', the seven men announce, 'it means things are going well', ultimately opting for reassuring inertia rather than disruptive change. And in the final headlined section, Snow White herself is recycled, as it were, to begin her story of hope and failure all over again – **'THE FAILURE OF SNOW WHITE'S ARSE | REVIRGINIZATION OF SNOW WHITE | APOTHEOSIS OF SNOW WHITE | SNOW WHITE RISES INTO THE SKY'** – accompanied by a phlegmatic shrug, **'HEIGH-HO'**, an ironic reference to Disney's paean to repetitive labour.

In *Snow White*, Barthelme captures the political mood of a pivotal moment in the American 60s: a point-of-poise, as the country turned rightwards, between progressive optimism and recursion. In this, the mythical thinking that looks towards the future simultaneously tumbles back on itself, and into an uncritical view of the past, as its consequent disorientations seek the reassurance of cherished systems of belief. The novel anticipates a Nixon administration whose political project was to alleviate America's cultural contestations, and to restore a sense of national self-belief. Eight years later, *The Dead Father* would capture America's mood at end of that process, as Saigon fell, and Watergate questioned the ultimate legitimacy of presidential power. The novel offers an overarching verdict on the American 60s, translating into a grand, multivalent account of mythical failure and ultimate inertia the desperation of *Foreign Devils*, the chaos of *Quake*, and the decay of *The Franchiser*.

⁴⁴ Richard M. Nixon, 8 August 1968.

5.4. The Dead Father.

'A Manual for Sons', *The Dead Father's* text-within-a-text, contains the following amid its dense aggregation of anecdotes and aphorisms:

Fathers are like blocks of marble, giant cubes, highly polished, with veins and seams, placed squarely in your path. They block your path, they cannot be climbed over, neither can they be slithered past. They are the 'past'.⁴⁵

The passage goes to the heart of the disorientating ontological space the novel inhabits. More a collection of wild excursions than a story *per se*, any accessible narrative, or 'path', is continually subsumed into manoeuvres and circularities which 'block' its progress, and seem to strand it in uneasy suspension. Its negotiation of its ostensive subject-matter – paternalism, filial obligation, inherited authority – consistently equivocates between veneration, fathers memorialised as 'marble' statues as it were, and youthful irritation, 'they cannot be climbed over'. The novel's eponymous character oscillates between the recognisable, a 'father' in all his demands and expectations, and the wildly improbable, human-sized one moment, a marauding 'giant' the next. He is dead and inert, 'placed squarely in your path', and yet confusingly still active, 'they block your path'; in one of the novel's most disconcerting phrases, 'dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead' (*DF* 3). And to the extent that, alive or dead, fathers continue to impose their authority, they also impose the weight of the 'past': their actions have produced the irritated offspring who are forced to acknowledge them even as they try to 'slither past' them, just as present circumstances struggle to escape their implication in the events, and traditions, of history.

The issues raised by *The Dead Father* are not limited however to, what many commentators have identified as, its ostensive focus on the perennial struggle between children and their fathers.⁴⁶ As its text spirals outwards so it invokes not only competing generations, but competing *groups*, each contesting the political influence of another: women against men, workers against managers and more. And to the extent that the novel's encyclopaedic references cluster around issues of political tension, they also, rather like the more popular reference points in Irvin Faust, question the perceived mythological imperatives

⁴⁵ Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004) p.129. Hereafter *DF*.

⁴⁶ See for example: Couturier and Durand, pp.39,40; Michael Zeitlin, 'Father-Murder and Father-Rescue: The Post-Freudian Allegories of Donald Barthelme', *Contemporary Literature*, 34 (1993), 182-203 (p.198); Gordon, pp.161-3; Robert Con Davis, 'Post-Modern Paternity: Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*', in *The Fictional Father: Lacanian Readings of the Text*, ed. by Robert Con Davis (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), pp.169-82.

and historical precedents which are deployed to advance systems of authority and legitimise political decisions in the present. In this respect, this section will argue, *The Dead Father* confronts a distinctly American experience. And in the conundrum that arises from that experience, it inscribes a sense of periodic crisis.

The American experience at stake here, as Lowenthal for example has identified, is a particular but 'sharply polarised' relationship with the specificities, and myths, of the country's foundation as a self-consciously *new* nation:

On the one hand, freedom from the encumbering past was a virtual dogma of the [American] Revolution and the new republic; on the other, Americans deplored their historically meagre landscapes and reverently protected the Founding Fathers' achievements. They could square neither their nostalgia nor their filio-piety with the national mission to sweep away past precept and tradition.⁴⁷

America, some of its early thinkers argued, was youthful *by design* and its exceptionalism was predicated in part on a process of continual invention, untrammelled by old world pieties. Thomas Jefferson, for example, argued that 'our creator made the world for the use of the living, and not of the dead [...] one generation of men cannot foreclose or burden its use to another'.⁴⁸ The 'American Adam' meanwhile, was 'an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry [...] standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling'.⁴⁹ In other words, a child who had severed all links with their 'dead father'.

At the same time, however, Americans were paradoxically in debt to the very Founding Fathers who had secured their subsequent ability to self-invent. As much as they repudiated the past they felt equally obliged to honour the inheritance of those who had fought a revolution and who had 'bequeathed to us all we have that is worth having'.⁵⁰ In other words, the 'dead fathers' are 'still with us'. America's poignant dilemma, Lowenthal summarises, 'inherited in having to protect the fruits of a Revolution whose main tenet was to disregard the past'.⁵¹

The argument here is that *The Dead Father* inscribes this dilemma into its formal construction and, consequently, intervenes critically into the dilemma's impact on a particular moment in U.S. history. In 1975, Americans were still reeling from images of escaping helicopters as the Vietnam adventure came to a humiliating end. Many of the generational

⁴⁷ David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) p.105.

⁴⁸ Thomas Jefferson quoted in Lowenthal, p.108.

⁴⁹ R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) pp.5,7.

⁵⁰ Lowenthal, p.117.

⁵¹ Lowenthal, p.122.

hopes of the 60s, symbolised for example by Woodstock, had collapsed into the fearful conservatism of Nixon's 1972 landslide re-election. And Watergate prompted debate about the legitimacy of America's political class and the limits of presidential authority. The country, as Lytle observes, was experiencing the fall-out from a period of 'uncivil wars':

For conservatives, the sixties left a legacy of so much to be undone; for dissenters, so much was left undone [...] How vibrant the world must have seemed for hippies who drove their VW Beetles up the New York Thruway toward Woodstock in August 1969. And what could have done more to confirm the sense of a government at war with its people than the revelations of Watergate? ⁵²

The Dead Father appeared therefore during a period of political and cultural crisis as America pondered what its revolutionary new nationhood continued to mean on the eve of the 1976 Bicentennial. The myths of exceptionalism and the New Frontier were deeply dented. The notion of continual invention had receded before a conservative backlash. Nixon's administration had violated the democratic ideals Americans revered. America was debating the essential legitimacy of its founding principles, while being caught between a desire for change and an attachment to the past which was, itself, reassuring and stifling by turns.

The Dead Father captures both that fundamental dilemma and that periodic sense of confusion. By imagining a multivalent father-figure who is domineering and endearing by turns, the novel explores the ambivalent influence of tradition, myth, historical authority and psychological influence between generations. By confronting the father with children who seek to displace him and yet, in doing so, have to adopt the very authoritarian strategies they seek to repudiate, the novel captures the dilemma of seeking revolutionary change while being implicated in the inertia of the past. And by locating both stories inside a never-never land which channels multiple cultural indicators and encounters into what is ultimately a pilgrimage that recalls America's foundational journey westwards, the novel constructs the ontological space for a bleak diagnosis as to how a country which anticipated an exceptional future in 1776 was reduced to desperate soul-searching some two hundred years later.

5.4.1. An Amalgam of Authorities.

The Dead Father's opening invites us to read the novel allegorically. A self-contained italicised section suggests how we might envisage the Dead Father – and some of the notions

⁵² Lytle, p.379.

of paternity, authority, control, and tradition his figure contains – before those notions are thrown into performative relief by his behaviour, and by the dramatic contestations, of the subsequent action proper (DF 3-5). Indeed, the novel's interrogation of power and influence is sustained in part by a persistent tension between heroic displays of the credentials of office and the flawed performance of the office-holder.

In the opening, the destabilising ambiguities which expose the detached self-regard of the President as 'father of us all' in 'The Young Visitirs' are writ large. The Dead Father is a multivalent, and poly-cultural, figure whose sheer presence, '*overall length, 3,200 cubits*', both towering over and dumped onto the abstract city where we find him ('*no one can remember when he was not here in our city*'), is already so absurd as to provocatively question whether his influence is actual, or simply unavoidable: '*the right knee is not very interesting and no one has ever tried to dynamite it, tribute to the good sense of the citizens*'. Into that physical presence, Barthelme incorporates a series of references which mediate between his Father as an allegorical concentration of wide-ranging notions of power, and the specific ambiguities surrounding power and inheritance in American culture.

The Dead Father is a physical, political, and narrative manifestation, and the three drift across one another so as to blur the boundaries between the public theatre, the practical prosecution, and the cultural assumption of influence. Thus, for example, he '*controls the rise, fall and flutter of the market*' while simultaneously controlling '*what Thomas [his son] is thinking [...] what Thomas will ever think*'. And thus too his bulk conjoins vulnerable flesh ('*the eyes a two valued blue*') with enduring stone statuary ('*jawline compares favourably to a rock formation*') and prosthetic technology ('*the left leg, entirely mechanical*') to run the gamut of sustained power projection, '*working ceaselessly night and day through all the hours for the good of all*'. Administrative power, spiritual guidance and popular cultural influence are inextricably linked into a blending of public institutions:

In the left leg, in sudden tucks or niches, we find things we need. Facilities for confessions, small booths with sliding doors [...] confessions are taped, scrambled recomposed, dramatised, and then appear in the city's theatres, a new feature-length film every Friday.

One speculates here whether the reference to taped confessions is a topical allusion to the White House recordings, with their missing eighteen minutes, which did so much to highlight Nixon's maladministration. Nonetheless, by opening up a complex relationship wherein private needs are subsumed into popular narratives ('*one can recognise moments of one's own, sometimes*') but where power intervenes to manipulate one into the other, the text simultaneously highlights the reassurances of subscribing, collectively, to shared notions of

authority and the disconcerting recognition that subscription may connive at intrusion and control. To that extent, the opening's projection of multivalent power is consistently shot through with destabilising ambiguities and, ultimately, an essential but unresolvable ambivalence.

The Dead Father operates '*for the good of us all*' (we are told this twice) and yet the citizens feel the need to tie him down with '*titanium steel chains*' to concrete blocks. Whether this is because they fear losing him, or fear losing *control* of him, adds to the ambivalence. He is venerated (even the '*mackerel salad*' in his teeth is memorialised '*in the sagas*') and despised ('*he is not perfect, thank God for that*'); required it appears if society is to function and yet resented; a celebrity ('*it is possible to admire the hair for a long time, many do*') and yet simultaneously a blockage, '*a sleeper* (both alive and asleep and a railway sleeper) *in troubled sleep*'.

In the sustained paradox that the Dead Father is '*half buried in the ground, half not [...] Dead, but still with us, still with us but dead*', Barthelme articulates what may be a universal restlessness with issues of authority: an inclination to demand freedom and reassuring structure simultaneously. But it is certainly a deeply ingrained American restlessness. It is rooted, for example, in the foundational notion of escaping old world strictures, and yet continuing to revere Europe's cultural continuities and, as Hodgson has noted, borrowing from its revered institutions.⁵³ And it is rooted in the generational notion of the self-renewing American Adam who nonetheless cannot escape his reverence for the long-dead Founding Fathers: '*we want the Dead Father to be dead. We sit with tears in our eyes wanting the Dead Father to be dead*'.

So perceived, the text's allegorical indicators are both general, and culturally specific. The Dead Father appears to preside over European streets, '*Avenue Pommard [...] Boulevard Grist*', and his eye colour recalls '*Gitanes*', European cigarettes. In this, his duality contains, simultaneously, a reference to the new world's particular nostalgia for the old and the new world's distinctive impulse towards repudiating what it has left behind. Elsewhere, Barthelme's descriptions invoke monumental statuary – '*The Dead Father's head [...] The head never moves [...] The brow is noble [...] and serene [...] his finely shaped delicately nostriled nose*' – and are irresistibly reminiscent of the giant memorials to Lincoln and Jefferson in Washington D.C. His intimidating scale is also the memorialised scale of revered presidents.

The novel's opening invites us to engage with the Dead Father as an allegorical figure of authority in general, and a culturally specific figure relating to America's contested

⁵³ Hodgson, *Myth of American Exceptionalism*, pp.30-61.

circumstances in particular. To the extent however that the opening also homes in on the instabilities already inherent in that figure, the dramatic interest in the subsequent text resides less in the degree to which it will reveal the Dead Father's contradictions than in the degree to which those contradictions can be managed to progress anything that might resemble a narrative. How can a figure whose contested power refuses to die ever ultimately be disposed of? And if the Dead Father '*controls [...] what Thomas will ever think, with exceptions*', how can a new generation manoeuvre inside the '*exceptions*' and progress beyond inherited systems in which it is already implicated? In short, *The Dead Father* can be read as the account of an attempt at revolution.

5.4.2. Contested Mythologies.

The Dead Father's core action, such as it is, invokes a rich cluster of literary and mythological parallels. 'A grand expedition [...] across an unknown parquet', a mission covering 'many kilometers' to 'an outpost of civilisation or human habitation' and beyond, it is most obviously a journey of discovery and definition (*DF* 6,168,105). In its references to the Golden Fleece, which the Father has been encouraged to believe will make him 'young again' with its 'great yellow electricity', the novel self-consciously infers not only the quest narrative of Jason but wider mythological contexts where the fleece offers power or insight (*DF* 9,35).⁵⁴ Indeed, the range of allusions on which *The Dead Father* appears to draw has attracted close critical attention, not least for their contribution to a metafictional framework which consolidates in form the manifold notions of inherited power and influence the novel sets out to interrogate.⁵⁵

The degree, however, to which the novel's allusions cluster also, and perhaps ultimately, around a distinctive *American* narrative has attracted less attention. In its encounters with the Wends, an improbable fatherless tribe which self-reproduces, and with a colony of dancing apes, its characters drift through a picaresque which recalls the down-river education of Huck Finn, or the motile transactions of Melville's *The Confidence Man*. In its sustained references to the open road – 'the countryside. Flowers. Creeping Snowberry. The road with dust [...] the jolting of the road. The dust. The sweat' – it positions itself alongside

⁵⁴ See for example: *Storytelling: An Encyclopaedia of Mythology and Folklore*, ed. by Josepha Sherman (Armonk: W.E.Sharpe, Inc., 2008), pp.35,125.

⁵⁵ See for example: Betty Catherine Dobson Farmer, 'Mythological, Biblical, and Literary Allusions in Donald Bartheleme's *the Dead Father*', *The International Fiction Review*, 6 (1979), 40 - 47; Gordon, p.162; Davis, p.187.

Whitman's and Kerouac's exploration of American space. In this reading, the novel's journey suggests a foundational errand into the American wilderness. (DF 13). And in this, the novel both reflects and revisits the impetus behind that primal expedition.

In the first instance, the act of dragging the Dead Father to his final interment suggests the first settlers' ambition to repudiate prior forms of authority while experiencing, what Turner described as, 'the expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society [which furnished] the forces dominating American character'.⁵⁶ Thus there is a sense of Manifest Destiny in Thomas' response to the Dead Father's accusation that his children are killing him: 'We? Not we. Not in any sense we. Processes are killing you, not we. *Inexorable processes*' (DF 158, italics mine). And thus too, the encounter with the apes is valorised by the expedition's women as 'new [...] quite new, a new experience [...] a feeling of newness', a transaction with the primitive which satisfies an instinctive impulse to move forward: 'What's so good about somebody new? | He's new. The Newness' (DF 100,101,99).

In the second instance, the journey also returns to that first expedition as if to recover a sense of foundational optimism that has since declined. Here, the novel suggests a comparison between two historical moments, one past one present, and directs attention towards the Dead Father's combined presence as a figure of generational oppression and as a figure who maintains a mythical continuity between two dispensations. And in this, the novel explores the contestations inside traditions which promise great outcomes, but which eventuate in anxiety. The Father talks at one point of 'all lines [being] my lines. All figure and all ground mine, out of my head' to which Julie, one of the travellers, replies ruefully, 'we had no choice' (DF 19). Elsewhere the Father will accuse his son Thomas of not understanding 'the larger picture'; Thomas replies 'I don't suggest I understand it now. I do understand the frame. The limits' as if to indicate that the generational bind is located not solely in the father's persistent *presence*, but also in the compromises in the mythical assertions he has bequeathed (DF 32).

Thus, a number of the novel's set-pieces, where the Dead Father asserts his omniscience or performs his perceived omnipotence, also expose the contradictions inside those assertions. In one example, the Father invokes the myths of Leda and the Swan and of Orpheus and Eurydice to underscore a story of potency and productivity in which he seduces 'a raven-haired maiden of great beauty' by turning himself into a haircut (DF 35-38). Their union produces:

⁵⁶ Turner, *Significance of the Frontier in American History*, p.2.

the poker chip, the cash register, the juice extractor [...] and many other humane and useful cultural artefacts, as well as some thousands of children of the more usual sort. I fathered as well upon her various institutions useful and humane such as the credit union, the dog pound, and parapsychology. I fathered as well various realms and territories.

Later he will tell of 'uncoiling [his] penis [...] sixty-five meters I would say' to effect a crossing of the River Styx when the maiden, whose name he has now forgotten, is taken into the underworld.

At issue here is not simply the self-defeating comic braggadocio, the assertions of masculinity which the expedition's women immediately satirise, 'forfuckin'gmidable, said Julie, I suddenly feel all mops and brooms'. At stake also is a mythology of persistent creativity and progress which claims to link the productivity of the present with the foundational stories of the past. The Dead Father asserts a value, and valorises his own presence, in the productions of a contemporary world which are putatively legitimised by traditional continuities, even if those continuities are always already precarious. Among the 'humane and useful' objects the Dead Father *fathers* is the absurdly grandiose 'Pool Table of Ballambangjang', a pronouncedly satirical example of mythical pretension attaching to the most mundane of consumer objects: its pockets are made from the mouths of 'leftover ugly-men-of-hell'.

This episode is one of several where Barthelme's satire extends the contradictions inside the multivalent notion of paternity into an exploration of the contemporary world's mythical contestations. Thus, for example, the notion that the father works 'for the good of all' is destabilised by a set-piece where administering justice becomes a collection of bizarrely arbitrary punishments: 'the trifler is well wrapped with strong cords and hung upside down from a flagpole at a height of twenty stories' (DF 83). Elsewhere, the very mythical creativity the Dead Father claims for himself is destabilised by displays of petulant violence, 'slaying', against culture ('in a grove of music and musicians. First he slew a harpist and a performer upon the serpent') and nature, 'in his rage he dispatched a macaque and a gibbon and fourscore innocent chinchillas who had been standing idly by watching the great slaughter' (DF 11,53).

The action of *The Dead Father* therefore is, in one key respect, a reimagining of, or a return to, the foundational wilderness experience of escaping the oppression of the past. Ironically, however the process of return in itself infers an implication in, and a simultaneous desire to jettison once again, what has arisen in the interim. As such, the Dead Father's persistence – '*dead but still with us, still with us but dead*' – inheres in the vertiginous conundrum that the past and its mythologies cannot ultimately be displaced because we are

consistently involved in their (re-) making. The violence the Dead Father displays may be repudiated but it is not detachable and is part instead of an inescapable continuity which still implicates those who seek to reject it.

5.4.3. Power Vacuums and Anxieties.

The climate of equivocation in *The Dead Father* is persistent, and revolving. Even as the Dead Father slays mercilessly, he remains 'noble'; he is 'dead only in a sense'; 'he is a sacred object, in a sense' (DF 53,14,106). The order of things, 'no fatherhood without childhood', requires, the Dead Father claims, that he both produces subsequent generations ('It was thrust upon me [...] fathering and then raising each one of thousands and thousands') and also consumes them, like the Titan Cronus, to prevent them displacing him: 'I had to devour them, hundreds, thousands, feefifofum, sometimes their shoes too' (DF 17-18). To those transporting him he is both a despised 'old fart' and a venerable ancestor who is 'bearing up rather well'; asserting his dignity one moment, throwing tantrums the next, 'I should have everything! ME! Myself! I am the Father! Mine! [...] From whom all blessings flow! To whom all blessings flow!' (DF 10,18,156). Critically, the Dead Father's multivalence and resilience are reassuring and disconcerting by turns: he has 'Authority. Fragile, yet present. He is like a bubble you do not wish to burst' (DF 67).

The management of this duality is central to the novel's politics and marks its intervention into the crisis climate of its publication. The process begins in the ironic degree to which the novel registers a resistance to its figure of authority - underlined by his grandiose volatility – and yet simultaneously registers (and then develops) an ultimate fear of the power vacuum his departure might leave. If the Dead Father is 'dead but still with us', then his resilience is predicated in part on need. Two episodes throw into relief this underlying irony of requiring what we reject.

In Chapter 13, the expedition arrives at a location which is either 'the mountain', or 'the cathedral', or both, depending on perspective (DF 84-5). For the Dead Father, and some other travellers, it is a site of calm courtliness and spiritual security. There are 'flowers blue with a border of white [...] golden censers swinging left right left right [...] confessional in rows' where the Dead Father strolls and then sits with one of the women, Julie, at his feet, an 'exotic and religious experience'. For Thomas, by comparison, it opens 'onto the void. The drop. The clouds'. He finds himself sitting in an 'egg-shaped aperture [...] slipping towards the edge' desperately 'hooking shoulder around opening'. In the image of the insecure son, emerging as

if new-born from the 'egg', and the secure (Dead) Father comfortable inside structures of antiquity ('bronze doors intricately worked with scenes'), historical power ('row of grenadiers in shakos') and spiritual tradition ('tall old man in golden mitre'), the episode captures a complex generational dynamic: a son envying the stability enjoyed by the father; a father smug in the face of the son's disorientating newness – 'the Dead Father smiling [...] the Dead Father's head thrown back against the wall'.⁵⁷

In another episode, this sense of anxiety and exposure fuses enduring mythologies with a proximate politics. The expedition's men are experiencing 'a melancholy' and suffering from 'headache, vertigo, stinging in the ears' (DF 91-93). They wonder if, by dragging the Dead Father to his grave, they '*are doing the right thing?*'. In this, the men add further credentials to the Dead Father's perceived overarching authority. He is 'the grand Father the moon-hanger the eye-in-the-sky the old meister [...] a Being of the highest anthropocentric interest, as well as the one who keeps the corn popping from the fine green fields'. Crucially, the men frame an anxiety which is largely rooted in issues of primal belief and natural superstition as a legal and political question. Is the Dead Father being 'lese-majestied by us poor galoots'? Are they 'culpable? To what degree? will there be a trial after? official inquiry? [...] white paper?'

The characters' dilemma is that they are as resistant to the sustained influence of the past and of authorising systems as they are anxious about the power vacuum of their potential absence. The men are 'dubious' because they embrace the change and progress offered by Thomas the son ('all the love and respect we have for you Thomas-the-Tall-Standing') and yet simultaneously cannot disassociate themselves from the organisational structures that have formed them, 'how much of the blame if there is blame is ours? ten percent? twenty percent?'

In both these episodes, it is Thomas' reaction that underlines the deeper politics: a management of change that speaks the language of revolutionary departure but subtly persists in maintaining the continuities he purports to reject. In the Cathedral/Mountain episode, Thomas' personal disorientation resolves, momentarily, into both an adoption of the Father's atavistic posture and a challenging displacement of his sexual power:

⁵⁷ For a Lacanian reading of this, in the context of the 'Law of the Father', see Teresa L. Ebert, 'Postmodern Politics, Patriarchy, and Donald Barthelme', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 11 (1991), 75-82 (pp.75-77).

It is possible to fall here, Julie said [...]
 Are you frightened beloved? Thomas asked.
 He stuck his sword in the ground and put his arms around her [...]
 Move up more under my breasts so that the bottom of the breasts can rest
 upon the tops of the arms, Julie said.
 Not in front of me said the Dead Father.

In the episode with the men, meanwhile, Thomas adopts a more politically cynical position. Suggesting that by burying the Dead Father they are collectively involved in a legitimate process of transformation ('we are helping him through a difficult period'), he seeks to persuade the men that their insecurity is implicit in any systemic renewal, 'things are not simple. Error is always possible [...] You must be able to tolerate the anxiety. To do otherwise is to jump ship, ethics-wise'. Thomas asserts his leadership by deliberately playing on the anxieties of his constituency, ironically annexing the very posture of (enduring) guidance in the face of (immediate) disorientation that is included in the Dead Father's amalgam of authorities and which he purports to supplant.

Fear of power on the one hand. Fear of a power vacuum on the other. And in the performance here of Thomas, a manoeuvring between the two. As much as *The Dead Father* focusses much of its attention on the dualities inside its complex image of paternity and authority, the novel's *political* concern is what, if anything, can *replace* it.

5.4.4. Power Games and Crisis.

At one point, Thomas describes 'fatherhood as a substructure of the war of all against all' (DF 76). At another, he specifies 'murdering' as the moral of a story in which he encounters various forms of authority: bureaucratic, 'four men in dark suits with shirts and ties and attaché cases containing Uzi submachine guns', and mythical, the Sphinx-like 'Great Father Serpent' (DF 40-46). The novel retains a nagging sense that the management of generational change in the face of prevailing influence is balanced precariously between negotiation and violence. The Dead Father proudly displays his 'anger' in response to confrontation by 'slaying' and then desecrating his victims, he 'pulled from his trousers his ancient prick and pissed upon the dead artists' (DF11-12). The Wends, who sleep with their mothers in an Oedipal rejection of fatherhood, refuse to let Thomas' expedition pass unless the Dead Father is 'cut up and cooked' (DF 74). The Manual for Sons, meanwhile, recognises that Oedipal murder is a likely response to 'the original jealousy' of sons towards their fathers, but then advises against it:

Patricide is a bad idea, first because it is contrary to law and custom and second because it proves beyond a doubt, that the father's every fluted accusation against you was correct: you are a thoroughly bad individual, a patricide! – members of a class of persons universally ill-regarded. (DF 144-145)

Negotiating with the Wends, Thomas agrees to a limited act of violence as 'a little tableau' by removing the Father's 'left leg, the leg mechanical, not human' (DF 75).

There is already an incipient sense of crisis in *The Dead Father's* primary proposition that the influence of the past persists beyond rejection. That sense of crisis deepens as violent repudiation is embraced and then denied as it is implicated in the very exercise of power it seeks to contest. And the inscription of crisis deepens still further in the process which gives the novel its dramatic tension: the extent to which the expedition can progress beyond the dilemma of repudiated and yet inescapable authority by managing a generational exchange of power which may ultimately obviate the burdens of the past.

In this, the novel infers the generational turbulence that characterised the late 60s – the rise of Students for a Democratic Society, for example, the assertion of women's rights – but also offers a diagnosis as to why the pressure for change ultimately buckled and turned America rightwards in the mid-70s. In Thomas, the revolutionary leader, that diagnosis captures the degree to which he aspires, or is forced, to apply the inherited structures of authority his errand into the wilderness is designed to revisit. In the women characters, Emma and Julie, it resides in the ironic degree to which they too are obliged to insert themselves into the very hierarchies of power their liberationist politics inspire them to reject.

Thomas first. The very process of 'performing [his] leadership functions' demands that he destabilise a Father whose sustained authority threatens his own (DF 20). Thus he balances a show of respect – 'you deal too harshly with him' Thomas warns Julie at one point – with a programme of incremental disempowerment and emasculation, systematically stripping the Dead Father of his trappings of authority and thrusting sexuality – his belt buckle, his sword – and persuading him to write his will. He counters the Father's rhetoric of mythical assertion which a rhetoric of generational resistance, highlighting a Kafkaesque abduction where he is interrogated by bureaucratic elders, 'the man in the mask said that I was wrong and had always been wrong [...] Then he hurt me with documents' (DF 43-3). He denies the Father access to a pornographic film and then taunts him with his own sexual access to Julie.

It is one of the novel's persistent contentions that sons cannot declare their ultimate independence from the generational influences that created them: 'your true task, as a son' the Manual advises, 'is to reproduce all the enormities touched upon in this manual, but in an

attenuated form' (DF 145). To that extent, Thomas is a figure in and of crisis. Leading an expedition whose project is the rejection of the past and the embrace of the new, he is forced nonetheless to succumb to the anxiety of influence, to fear a power vacuum, and to connive at existing power structures to get the job done: 'It is a great pleasure, being boss' he says, 'wouldn't you agree?' (DF 66). At the same time, the appropriation of power is always and already partial: Thomas the leader is also a 'stutterer', intimidated by the Great Father Serpent, for whom *murdering* becomes the nervously irresolute 'murderinging' (DF 46).

The sense of confused compromise around the exchange of power deepens in the role of the women characters, who both challenge and then ironically appropriate a contested paternalism. In one explicit instance Julie accuses patriarchal tradition of deliberately displacing mothers in the passage between generations:

The fucked mother conceives [...] the whelping is, after agonies I shall not describe, whelped. Then the dialogue begins. The father speaks to it. The "it" in a paroxysm of not understanding [...] Like a boar in a storm. What is there? The father.

Where is the mother? Asked Emma.

The mother hath not the postlike quality of the father. She is more of a grime. (DF 77)

At the same time however as protesting patriarchal dominance, the women are happy to use their sexuality to control both Thomas and the Dead Father. Julie variously provides, and then denies, Thomas 'a suck of the breast', asserting a maternal dependency to offset the paternal (DF 10). The Father's sexual advances and dependencies are, by comparison, consistently refused, 'it is because you are an old fart, Julie explained. Old farts don't get much' (DF 10).

To the extent that Thomas can neither escape, nor avoid adopting, the Dead Father's structures of power, so Emma and Julie too are implicated in a power game that follows from their rejection of patriarchy. The consequence is that a project that proposes radical change always risks being drawn back into a crisis of indecision. Barthelme underlines this point in the traces of inertia that infect one of the novel's most distinctive formal innovations.

The four dialogues between Emma and Julie, emphatically fragmentary and elliptical, have been identified as self-conscious challenges to inherited, perhaps male-dominated, systems of narrative order and control. McVicker, for example, notes that they 'represent both the degree to which these women have been alienated by the prevailing order, as well as their attempt to displace that order'.⁵⁸ And indeed, to the extent any accessible meaning can

⁵⁸ Jeanette McVicker, 'Donald Barthelme's the Dead Father: "Girl's Talk" and the Displacement of the Logos', *boundary 2*, 16 (1989), 363-90 (p.365).

be detected amongst their pronounced discontinuities, lines like ‘women together changing that which ought to be changed’ and ‘the simplest basic units develop into the richest natural patterns’ might suggest the emergence of a discourse more progressively productive than what has gone before (*DF* 24,25). But at the same time ‘control is the motif’ (repeated twice) and the women appear to acknowledge there are ‘groups surrounding us needing direction’ (*DF* 152,155,24). To that extent, there is a continual tension between a resistance to prevailing power systems, and a coincident fear of a power vacuum. In one telling reference, for example, one of the women talks of being ‘raised in the faith’ and of some figure being ‘ready again to send his Son to die for us’ in an ironic allusion to the Christian tradition which suggests both a subscription to, and a scepticism before, traditional mythologies: the reference to Jesus as saviour is immediately likened to ‘sending a hired substitute to the war’ (*DF* 87,62).

Thus, on the one hand, the dialogues animate a repudiation of inherited notions of authority: ‘they like to suck | They do like to suck’, repeated twice, suggesting an ultimate dependency on maternal, as opposed to or as well as, paternal influence. But on the other hand, the women are drawn back into the very sexual power games they seek to displace. They talk of competing for Thomas’ attention:

Who’s the boss.
One in the orange tights.
He’s not bad-looking.
That’s one opinion.
Inclined to tarry for a bit. (*DF* 23)

And while they dismiss the Dead Father’s displays of violence as ‘pure cardboard’, they are nonetheless prepared to visit violence on each other to assume dominance; ‘give you a shirtful of sore tit | Give you a fret in the gizzard’, ‘slit your nose for you’ (*DF* 12,60,87).

The very centrifugal nature of these dialogues, throwing into relief as they do the mythically charged, comic and self-consciously teleological speeches and fables of the novel’s males, draws attention in itself to the persistent degree to which they are nonetheless forced to revert to notions of power and strategies of dominance. It is as if the liberationist posture cannot avoid adopting what it seeks to reject in order to succeed.

Towards the end of the fourth and final dialogue a mood of sombre resignation infects the fragments:

Darkening the skies about the walkers.
 Poring over diaries and memoirs for clues to the past.
 Most people conceal what they feel with great skill.
 Not getting anywhere not making any progress.
 God may surprise me [...]
 Not getting anywhere not making any progress.
 Control is the motif. (DF 155)

The sense here of not being able to break away, of a history that cannot be escaped, of a present that is going nowhere, of a heavenly father that still offers the possibility of hope, not only highlights the degree to which Julie and Emma are themselves hindered from completing their project, but also the degree to which the entire expedition, 'the walkers', may be forced to confront what it seeks to 'conceal': that the displacement of one form authority involves the application of another. In this, the novel's dramatic interest shifts from how the Dead Father will ultimately be disposed of to what can or will replace him. And in this, Thomas, Emma and Julie, the new generation, find themselves involved in a collective power game which aspires to change ('it is obvious that but for a twist of fate we and not they would be calling the tune' says Julie at one point) but which is ultimately regressive: 'repetition is reality' reads one of the dialogue fragments. The novel's concluding diagnosis of crisis is contained in this dilemma of inescapable return, of 'progress' not being made.

5.4.5. A Failed Revolution.

The Dead Father ends bleakly. Its ultimate despondency, however, is not confined to the fact that the Father is finally laid in a 'large excavation' amidst forlorn pleas for 'one moment more' of life (DF 174-7). Nor is it confined to the Father's, and the reader's, rueful sense that the final act was inevitable all along: 'you're not alive, Thomas said, remember? [...]' I wasn't really fooled, said the Dead Father'. Rather, there is a bleakness, and a sense of residual crisis, in the degree to which either nothing has changed at the end of the text or, worse, that a compromised authority has simply been replaced by confusion.

Any sense that the novel's errand into the wilderness might eventuate in a return to the foundational act of (re-) invigorated opportunity, for example, collapses around an erosion of its own mythic indicators. The Golden Fleece turns out to be Julie's public hair, 'quite golden', displayed in an act of casual striptease, 'Julie lifted her skirt', which reads variously as the final reveal in a con-trick, as a defiant reminder that power may boil down to sex or, more provocatively perhaps, as a resigned recognition that what was perceived as an ultimate

mythical goal is ultimately little more than a cyclical act of repetition. 'All there is. Julie said. Unfortunately. But this much. This where life lives. A pretty problem. As mine as yours. I'm sorry'. Life goes on. The father will be replaced.

But replacement does not, it seems, mean progress. Thomas, implicated in the very performance of power he seeks to bury, orders the Dead Father not to touch the 'Fleece'. In an encounter with a figure who has been following the expedition at a distance, and who turns out to be 'Mother', Thomas is as dismissive as his predecessor. The Dead Father doesn't 'remember her very well'; Thomas sends her off to the store for groceries (*DF* 170). Julie meanwhile continues to pursue a power game of her own, cajoling the Dead Father into his grave, 'I'll come and hold your hand', controlling Thomas by dictating access to her sexuality and allowing him to 'place [...] his hand on the Fleece, outside the skirt'. As the 'bulldozers' arrive to bury, or plant, the Dead Father in the 'good black earth' – even here the ambiguity persists as to whether he will end or be recycled – the generation he leaves behind is filling the power vacuum with a regression towards the systems of control it sought to replace.

Writing in 1966, Michael Harrington, one of the leading figures in the New Left, described the emergence of 60s generational radicalism as 'a sense of outrage, of having been betrayed by all the father figures, which derives from an original innocence.'⁵⁹ It is a statement that resonates to the progressive ambitions of the Kennedy era but which also, and ironically, anticipates the sense of end-of-60s recursion that is captured in *The Dead Father*: the paradox of trying to escape the past by adhering to the very objectives the past has bequeathed, of being ultimately compromised by foundational ideas and mythologies that promised so much before stumbling over their own contradictions. And to that extent Barthelme's Nixon Years fictions can be read as grand inscriptions of America's grand mythical dilemma, and its particular impact on 60s and early 70s politics: of looking for mythical outcomes, as if promised by birthright, only to find the inconvenient contingencies of history blocking the way. And to that extent too perhaps, Barthelme's elusive fictions both illuminate – and are illuminated by – the other fictions examined in this thesis. Their combination of encyclopaedic mythical investigation and acute topical reference situate *Snow White* and *The Dead Father* as overarching statements which capture the pivotal moments where America's political hopes turned to political betrayal and whose incidental movements towards crisis are registered in the deepening contestations between myth and history tracked by Faust, Wurlitzer and Elkin.

⁵⁹ Michael Harrington, 'Mystical Militants', *New Republic*, 18 February 1966, in *New Republic* <<https://newrepublic.com>> [accessed 8 January 2017]

Chapter Six

Conclusion

To recognise the power of the American myth of a covenant blessing the new land is simply to recognise a crucial fact in our history.¹

Our American past and the theories of politics it is thought to imply, have become the yardstick against which national life is measured.²

This thesis developed its argument on the conviction that foundational myth – long perceived as a driver of American experience – achieved a particular *political* significance in the Nixon Years. That it became a focus for a crisis of expectation wherein mythical aspirations, invoked by 60s politicians in a spirit of national (re-)assertion, collided with their own historical contradictions, and wherein exceptionalist ambitions, global and personal, collapsed into their own contestations, sometimes violently. And it is that climate of turbulence – where ‘the American century [...] foundered on the shoals of Vietnam’, and a ‘rupture of comity’ in American public life ‘shreds the society, and turns the city into a holocaust’ – that underpins, I have argued, the construction and political distinctiveness of the writing, later labelled as postmodernist, that was forged in the late 60s and early 70s.³

Of the three core propositions I outlined in the introduction (p. 8), the first two are largely substantiated, I would suggest, by close reading the writers, Faust, Wurlitzer and Elkin, who constitute my first three case studies. The third and most ambitious proposition – to advance the argument about the *overall* political character of American postmodernist writing by reframing discussion of Barthelme, one of its exemplary authors – attracts some evidential support, but also suggests limitations that invite further research.

When, in relation to my first proposition, the work of Faust, Wurlitzer and Elkin is refracted through the American myths actively in play in the Nixon Years, it starts to resonate to ‘absent causes’. An apparently elusive detachment, a tendency towards fragmentation or centrifugal excess capture not only a broad crisis in representation, as inherited narratives are buffeted by turbulent contingency, but also, via its circuits of popular cultural and topical reference, a sense of specific crisis in an adjacent politics. The exceptionalist project in Vietnam is an inescapable, yet tacit, presence Faust’s novels, and his disintegrating characters’

¹ Irving Howe, *Socialism and America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1985), p.136.

² Boorstin, *Genius of American Politics*, p.22.

³ Bell, ‘End of American Exceptionalism’, p.204,233.

desperation for narrative mediates the disorientating historical change in national mood as exhilaration descended into inertia and as Nixon sought to displace national fragmentation and global humiliation with a re-assertion of foundational prestige. Kennedy's New Frontier is consistently invoked, and destabilised, in the 'alternative Americas' of Wurlitzer's ontological dystopias which strip back the progressive mythology and sense of destiny which sought to (re-)politicise the expansion of American space. And the myth of success as birthright, of a personal equivalence to a national sense of exceptionalism and destiny, animates the novels of Elkin as they draw out connections between America's foundational dilemmas – its early equivocation between material achievement and moral reserve – and an eventual triumph of image over substance that sees the 70s recession as implicated in a broader sense of pre-Bicentennial confusion and anxious retrenchment in the face of affluent overreach.

The topical specificity of those concerns is critically confronted in formal innovations that would be catalogued later as featuring in postmodernist writing's perceived distinctiveness more generally: my second proposition. Metafiction, later invoked by Hutcheon as inscribing an intrinsic postmodernist contradictiveness and as highlighting the cultural construction of historical narratives, emerges in *Faust*, I would suggest, as a more topically specific interface where the narrative (re-)assertions of myth (politically promoted as pulling the vagaries of history towards a providential teleology for the American 60s) and the buffeting urgencies of immediate events contest each other. *Faust*'s metafiction actively intervene into a climate of contemporary disorientation where spectacular political assertions were simply not borne out in the Vietnamese countryside, in the suburbs of Detroit or on the edge of Harlem. Ontological zones in Wurlitzer operate, I would suggest, as politically necessary laboratory spaces where an otherwise uncritical, and popular cultural, myth of the American West can be exposed to history. Here a strategy that McHale suggests realises a dispositional reluctance to interrogate becomes instead an active means for questioning what was the American 60s' most grandiloquent expression of mythical thinking. Elkin's rhetorical extravagances and fabulations emerge less as self-sufficient engagements with language – promoted by Gass, and underpinning the perception that postmodernism is more formally than politically oppositional – and more as inscriptions of mythical overreach. Breathless statements of national purpose teeter over into their own contradictions as they run out of road. Escalations of the bizarre and the grotesque – like *The Franchiser's* family Finsberg – diagnose a disease in the American body politic.

Thus far, one might conclude two things from my first three case studies, chosen as they were for the degree to which their broad lack of critical baggage makes them an area of

'scorched earth', allowing a tentative return to the Nixon Years in the absence of subsequent critical assumptions or orthodoxies. First, that in inscribing a conversation between myth and history, they both resonate to the period's distinctive political conditions and also track America's incremental but rapid political and historical *changes*: from hope to despair, from frustrated optimism to reluctant retrenchment. Second, that once one errs from retrofitting formal strategies and returns instead, as best as one is able, to the periodic specificities of their innovation or critical necessity, fictional techniques that have come to define a poetics of postmodernist practice demonstrate instead (or as well) a sense of immediate urgency: they emerge as engagements with, and mediations of, proximate challenges as opposed to procedures for detached analysis.

What however of my third proposition?

The choice of Donald Barthelme as a form of conduit between the questions raised by my first three case studies and an argument about the politics of American postmodernist writing more widely was predicated on two considerations. First on his perceived status as an exemplary American postmodernist.⁴ Second on the degree to which his encyclopaedic range of formal practices, and teeming sites of reference, have come to be seen as wide-ranging inscriptions of postmodern culture's disorientated mood, commodified presentations and challenges to tradition *overall*, without ultimately coalescing around a clear political response to it.⁵ In short, if my argument throws new political light on an author as central to the received characterisation of American postmodernism as Barthelme, then political light might be cast onto other writers as well.

To that extent, my readings of a selection of Barthelme's short stories suggest that when his formal strategies are reframed as critical operations, exploring an interplay between mythical systems of belief and a periodic turbulence of teeming images and jostling allusions, they acquire a distinctively active political character. Individual words become sites of contention where myth and history collide and spiral outwards; suburban life is confronted with its mythical and historical deceptions; political candidates are suspended between mythical pretensions and mundane and intractable realities.

Barthelme's novels meanwhile emerge as grand, encyclopaedic meditations on the volatile persistence of mythical thinking, oscillating between precise contemporary reference

⁴ See footnote 9, p.8.

⁵ See footnote 9, p.8. Also: Mary Robertson, 'Postmodern Realism: Discourse as Antihero in Donald Barthelme's "Brain Damage"', in *Critical Essays on Donald Barthelme*, ed. by Richard E. Patteson, pp.124-138; Robert A. Morace, 'Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*: The Novel, the Critics and the Culture', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 26 (Fall,1984), 1-10.

and wider, and deeper, issues of inherited cultural authority. In my reading, their richness contains, *inter alia*, an engaged sensitivity to the adjacent dilemmas, and political divisiveness, of squaring systems of belief with their historical consequences. *Snow White* captures the double-bind, as Great Society optimism faltered, of embracing mythical promises while risking ultimate compromise in the historical contestations those myths repress. *The Dead Father* captures the pre-Bicentennial dilemma of an America, born out of revolution and sustained on myths of progress and reinvention, that found itself forced to seek the refuge of tradition as events beyond it left it disorientated and exposed to the contingencies of history.

As much however as one might contend that Barthelme's grand mythic mediations, so defined, might project an overarching political tendency, pulling other writers into an orbit around his perceived centrality, limitations necessarily apply. Any analysis based on selected case studies – even when one seeks to move as here between the central and the outlier – risks being held hostage by its choices. The range of Nixon Years experimental writing alone is such that one must be cautious about claiming to reframe it all, least of all as part of a larger political postmodernist project.

On the one hand, the argument here might be substantiated by, for example, seeing Oedipa Maas' detection of the idea of America itself in Pierce Inverarity's legacy – 'his need to possess, to alter the land, bring new skylines' – as a critique of New Frontier reinvention; by registering *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) as a subversion of the success myth where 'I never hear that word anymore, *Prosperity*. It used to be a synonym for *Paradise*'; or by reading *The Public Burning* (1977) as inscribing exceptionalist thinking, 'The War between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness', run amok.⁶ On the other hand, that political perspective on contested mythologies might struggle with less 'reference-laden' writing as the human-body-as-text formalism of Gass' *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968), or the typographic games of Federman's *Double or Nothing* (1971). The degree to which my myth-struggling-with-history analysis *ultimately* plays more widely requires further research into the underlying 'social energy' that flowed through and emanated from the Nixon Years. Of which, more shortly.

Another potential limitation lies in my proposition that the politics I identify are activist politics, that my selected writers open space for *agency*. I am mindful here of Hutcheon's observation that 'the postmodern has no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political *action*' and that, at best, 'in its very contradictions, postmodernist art [...] might be able to dramatise and even provoke change from within'.⁷ To that extent, my

⁶ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, p.123. Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions* (London: Vintage, 1992), p.2. Robert Coover, *The Public Burning* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), pp.149-156.

⁷ Hutcheon, *Politics*, p.3. Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p.7.

argument might qualify as one of nuance. That is to say that in arguing the political engagement inside Faust's metafictional interrogation of Vietnam exceptionalism, for example, I am simply specifying an *instance* of historiographic metafiction: highlighting subject specificity, and myth as the site of narrative construction, as opposed to a qualitative departure from Hutcheon's broader analytical categories. Equally, my emphasis on the contradictions that destabilise frontier mythology in Wurlitzer, that boil over in Elkin's language of commercial zeal, or indeed that reverberate through the vexed knots of reverence for and resistance to authority in Barthelme, might be seen as interpretive reiterations of Hutcheon's core perception of postmodernism as a series of 'self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement[s]'.⁸

The challenge posed by these perceived limitations in the current work – range of application, qualitative difference – necessarily returns analysis to the periodic and cultural specificities that I have sought to emphasise throughout. The extent to which individual works represent responses to immediate and challenging socio-political conditions, over and above their implication in more general theoretical categories, or indeed, in the case of Jameson, their dissolution into some larger historical model. In terms of the current state of critical debate, that challenge would seem to invite a project that squares the circle between Hutcheon's overarching principles, and Jameson's historical imperative, to discover, more comprehensively perhaps than the current work has so far achieved, the 'social energy' that distinguishes the underlying conditions and eventual terms of engagement that might specify the level of interventionism in America's literary experiments of the 60s and 70s.

My emphasis on the importance of myth in Nixon Years politics, and on popular culture as a particular site where periodic contestations are mediated, goes some way towards identifying a particular social ground. In retrospect, however, my initial methodological approach – cautiously guided by Jameson's 'political unconscious' – has, in the course of research and partly in response to an enunciated resistance to the legitimacy of grand narratives (not least Jameson's Marxism), become more *new historicist*. That is to say my mode of analysis, such as it is, has ultimately tended towards attempting to discover the detailed circuits of exchange between literature and non-literary phenomena within a particular set of historical and material conditions, what Stephen Greenblatt calls 'the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary

⁸ Hutcheon, *Politics*, p.1.

text', as opposed to the larger sweeps of history that might efface localised instances of political specificity.⁹ And any future research might flow from this.

To the extent that broadly historicist approaches to American postmodernism have moved on little since Klinkowitz's *Structuring the Void* (1992), I would currently contemplate two projects to address the current work's perceived limitations. First, an examination of the periodic exchange in media *languages*, over and above simple allusions to popular culture, which might locate a shared formal intermedial energy in, for example, a processing of folk history that links Altman's *Nashville* (1975) with DeLillo's *Americana* (1971), or the Smothers Brothers with Kurt Vonnegut. Second, an exploration of the interchange between innovative political advertising and cultural form: the degree for example to which collage links Nixon's campaign spots in '68, with Barthelme's 'Flight of Pigeons from the Palace' (1972), and with *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*. Here I would examine the proposition that, in the process of exchange, acts of manipulation are subverted into acts of activism.

In the meantime, a concluding return to Jameson's notion of past literatures delivering a 'long forgotten message [...] like Teiresias drinking the blood'.¹⁰ This thesis began research during the Obama Presidency and was written substantially during the campaign and election of Trump. The *New York Times* was not alone in noting a similarity in tone between the 2016 election and an earlier shift, in 1968, from expansiveness to anxious recursion inside the rhetoric of American myth: Trump's nomination acceptance was 'a remarkable embrace – open and unhesitating – of Nixon's polarising campaign tactics, and of his overt appeals to Americans frightened by a chaotic stew of war, mass protests and racial unrest'.¹¹ I would note simply that Faust, Wurlitzer, Elkin and Barthelme saw this coming. And their engagement with the distinctive turbulence of the Nixon Years contains a residual activism perhaps in its anticipation of a more persistent American tendency to revert to myth in response to the disorientations of postmodern culture. In Trump's 'Make America Great Again' there is the latest reinvocation of an uncritical exceptionalism, and an associated impetus towards no-holds-barred commercial success. In his threats of force, there is the same aggression that sought to define U.S. destiny at the first frontier. And perhaps, most eerie of all, there is the ending of Wurlitzer's *Quake*:

⁹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p.5.

¹⁰ Jameson, *Unconscious*, p.3

¹¹ Michael Barbaro and Alexander Burns, 'In Trump's Voice, It's a New, New Nixon', *New York Times*, 19 July 2016, p.A1.

“We’ll build up our own goddamn wall”

[...] I made my way towards the wall. It was the end now for me [...] the guard raised his rifle and pointed it at me

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