Terrorism and Sentiment in Twentieth-Century Fiction

Conrad to DeLillo

BY

MARK S. BENNETT
B.A., Wittenberg University, 1999
M.A., DePaul University, 2004

THESIS
Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2014

Chicago, Illinois

Defense Committee:

Christian K. Messenger, Chair and Advisor
Mark Canuel, English
Nicholas Brown, English
John Huntington, English
Alex Kurczaba, Slavic and Baltic Studies
This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Jennie, whose patience and emotional support was crucial throughout the research and writing process, and to my grandmother, Ruth, who instilled in me the love of books and learning.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee—Chris Messenger, Nick Brown, Mark Canuel, John Huntington, and Alex Kurczaba—for their support, guidance, and wisdom that they have imparted to me throughout this entire research and writing process.

I would also like to thank all of my colleagues with whom I work and teach in the English Department—graduate students and lecturers alike—who have sustained me intellectually, emotionally, and socially, each day that I’ve worked on this project.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family for the emotional support they have given me, and for instilling the lifelong love of reading and learning.

MSB
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION:&lt;br&gt;THE EMOTIONAL CHARGE OF TERRORISM IN FICTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. “THE SPIRIT OF REVOLUTION” AND&lt;br&gt;“THE PHRASES OF SHAM SENTIMENT”:&lt;br&gt;Melodrama and Irony in Conrad’s Novels of Terrorism</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. THE NECESSARY MURDER:&lt;br&gt;Ideology and Moral Conflict in the Spanish Civil War</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. SEVERED HEADS AND POWER LINES:&lt;br&gt;Postcolonial Violence in Modernist and Postmodernist Fiction</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. THE CURIOUS KNOT: Cyber-Capital, Terrorism,&lt;br&gt;and Art’s Third Way in DeLillo’s Millennial Novels</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION:&lt;br&gt;ISLAMISTS, HIJACKERS, AND THE PROBLEMS&lt;br&gt;OF REPRESENTATION: Terrorist Subjectivities in Post-9/11 Fiction</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The Emotional Charge of Terrorism in Fiction

[T]he venerable literary productions of the 19th and early 20th centuries are not particularly relevant to contemporary terrorism. There are, to be sure, local insights, psychological resonances, striking coincidences of theme or imagery. But in the end, such great works of literature are too refined—artistically too good, if you will—to explain the gutter phenomenon of contemporary terrorism. To understand that, one does not require so sophisticated an instrument as Henry James or Fyodor Dostoevsky. One requires something blunter, less delicate, more malevolent.

—Roger Kimball, “Demons Under Western Eyes: Terror in Books and in Our Cities” (2001)

I have no doubt...that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won’t say more convinced than they but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them had ever done in the whole course of his life….this statement, too, is not a boast. I could not have done otherwise. It would have bored me too much to make-believe. (xxxix)

—Joseph Conrad, Author’s Note to The Secret Agent (1920)

“Incomprehensible horror sparks a frantic search for comprehension,” Roger Kimball observed in his op-ed piece for The National Review in the month following the 9/11 attacks. “Among the bookish, this search often takes the form of a hunt for literary parallels.” Kimball then points out why classic works of literature are precisely the wrong means of understanding twenty-first-century terrorism. Though Kimball admits that there are “local insights, psychological resonances, striking coincidences of theme or imagery” in novels of terrorism written by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Henry James, Émile Zola, and Joseph Conrad, he sees their terrorists as petty and dull, their “evil” banal in any case.

The European anarchists and nihilists in those late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century novels are quaint compared to Al Qaeda who had just destroyed the World Trade Center and killed three thousand people in Kimball’s own day. No, Kimball insists, we must look to Mein Kampf rather than Conrad to truly understand the mind of Osama bin Laden. Kimball’s is only one of hundreds of popular and academic journalistic essays that were written in the months following the 9/11 attacks that explicitly referenced novelists as providing illuminating clues to the phenomenon of contemporary terrorism.
In the years following 9/11, any work of fiction that deals with murder and terror—indeed any violent act that could be construed as terrorism—has become fair game for doing the work of political critique of terrorism. Terrorism, in this view, becomes a truly transhistorical phenomenon; that is the only way for such claims to make any sense. Kimball was merely bucking the trend, then, in claiming that a text less artistic, more ideological, is needed to perform such an analysis.

Granted, any work of art can be made to serve political purposes in present and future times. Granted, the politicized use of art often runs contrary to the artist’s original intentions for the work, whether or not the artist is alive to correct misapprehensions about the work. Such was the case in the months and years following the 9/11 attacks, as numerous political commentators cited a string of novels as fictive keys for unlocking the concepts of present-day terrorism in revealing ways. There was a relatively short but distinguished list of novels that dealt with terrorism conspicuously, as a coordinating theme, that were frequently cited by scholars and journalists in popular and critical discourse: Dostoevsky’s *Demons* (also known as *The Possessed*), James’s *The Princess Casamassima*, Zola’s *Germinal*, Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, G.K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, Don DeLillo’s *Libra* and *Mao II*—all of these novels of terrorism were praised by commentators for providing insight into the mind of the terrorist and the phenomenon of terrorism more generally. Lesser-known works such as Mary McCarthy’s *Cannibals and Missionaries*, Heinrich Böll’s *Under the Net*, John Le Carré’s *The Little Drummer Girl*, and Doris Lessing’s *The Good Terrorist* could also readily be cited. All of these novels dealt with various instances of terrorism in the late twentieth century prior to the 9/11
attacks, when the American public was forced to reckon with Al Qaeda, what seemed at
the time like a strange, new postmodern permutation of Islamist terrorism, and to find
earlier schemas and analogies for comprehending this new dispensation. Along with a
much wider range of films, any novel that was seen to treat terrorism in any conspicuous
way, that didn’t require too much parsing, was fair game for being referenced as crucial
for understanding the phenomenon of terrorism that had gripped the public imagination in
that moment.

The charge of “terrorism”—when certain actions are labeled “terrorist attacks”
and certain people “terrorists”—is not something to be taken as self-evident, requiring no
justification. Since the early nineteenth century, the word “terrorism” has taken on a wide
range of shifting emotional, moral, and political valences, some valorizing and some
condemning. In a narrow sense, the term refers to a public act of violence committed by
an individual or a group that is not sanctioned by a governing state. This view assumes
that the state has a monopoly on the legal uses of armed violence, and thus terrorists are
circumstances, that constitute “terrorism,” then, is subject to ever-shifting debate. No
stable definition of “terrorism” is possible, and the term can be deployed strategically to
condemn individuals, groups, or states in a powerful legal and moral sense. “Insofar as
we use the word to describe particular forms of political violence, it is known,” Richard
Rubenstein claims of the use of the term “terrorism” in his Alchemists of Revolution:
Terrorism in the Modern World. However, Rubenstein adds, “[i]nsofar as we use it to
judge the moral and political validity of such violence, it seems beyond rigorous
examination” (20). Rubenstein sums up the problem for the analysis of terrorism here,
since such analysis is inevitably laden with moral and ethical baggage. It’s a politically strategic move to label someone “terrorist,” but in doing so, we’re crossing into subjective moral and ethical territory which complicates, or moves “beyond rigorous examination.” Once we start getting down to the business of analyzing terrorism, we must be prepared to make all sorts of comparisons and equivocations, as we see that “legitimate” violence often operates no differently from the illegitimate kind, and that what was once considered “illegitimate” by the regime in power since becomes “legitimate” if a new regime is established. “The fulcrum of analysis,” Rubenstein says, “is the point at which description and judgment merge” (ibid.).

Despite the problems of political analysis, the matter of judging which acts constitute terrorism, and of judging the moral grounds of such acts, is fundamentally a politically oriented matter of perspective, depending on one’s own subject position within the structure of power of a given society. Being labeled a “terrorist,” in all cases, has its inevitable political consequences. The truism “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” is particularly instructive. One may assume the honorific term “freedom fighter” while disavowing the toxic term “terrorist” no matter what actions he commits. “Terrorism” as a term is never neutral in any sense, and in the latter half of the twentieth century has been made to carry a negative valence in all discourses. It is in the political interests of the ruling powers to label subversive elements terroristic, denoting such elements as criminal or evil and justifiably subject to extraordinary measures of policing. This criminalization, or demonization, may compel people to shun “terrorists,” casting them outside the pale of the human community. Friends and family must repudiate their ties to these people for fear of what these “terrorists” might do, or what the state might do
to them for aiding and abetting the terrorists. The conferring of the “terrorist” label is a performative function of rhetoric, and in all modern cases it is intended to subject those so-labeled to extraordinary situations of ostracism.²

While politically oriented violence has always been endemic to human society, terrorism is a phenomenon inherent in the modern nation-state, coexistent with the advent of the republic and the development of modern bourgeois societies. The French Revolution and the Terror that raged from 1789 to 1794 was the first systematic and widespread use of such politicized terror in the modern West, where substate agents successfully toppled and executed the incumbent regime and then waged further war on subversive elements within once they seized power. Indeed, with France as the primary example, terrorism sometimes plays a foundational role in the formation of modern nation-states. In Europe and America, terrorism in the form of bombings and assassinations of public figures was widespread throughout the late nineteenth century right up to the First World War, largely perpetrated by left-wing revolutionary groups.³

Terrorism in the twentieth century became a tactic used largely by ideologically driven political groups. The twentieth-century Bolshevik and Fascist ascendancies were remarkable cases where radical groups took the reins of government through the calculated use of violence, and, once in power, they continued to exert terror in systematic ways upon their own populations, often through encouraging acts of violence among their own citizens in rooting out political enemies and facilitating a climate of pervasive fear at the ground level.⁴ The antiwar bombings of government targets committed by radical elements of the New Left, most notoriously the Weather Underground, were the most publicized cases of such leftist terrorism in the U.S. in the
late 1960s and early 1970s, though the Red Army Faction and its splinter Baader-Meinhof Gang of West Germany, and the Red Brigades of Italy, which all comprised homegrown radicals (disaffected youth—and most often young men—with privileged backgrounds, as it has often been noted) also received intense public attention throughout the 1970s. In a much different context, anticolonial terrorism often played an instrumental role in driving Western colonizing powers to abdicate their colonial claims after the Second World War, and the Israeli Irgun’s and Algerian FLN’s bombing campaigns played significant roles in driving their colonizers (the British and French, respectively) to abandon their claims. Several ethnic separatist groups also employed terrorism throughout the second half of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, such as the Basque ETA in Spain and the Provisional IRA in the U.K. The rise of Middle Eastern terrorism is the most recent and perhaps the most publicized facet of terrorism in the ongoing public discourse, with its longest-lasting and most conspicuous manifestation being the Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel. It should be noted that the recent wave of jihadist attacks committed by Al Qaeda and their related elements can be seen as a new form of terrorism that is arguably not bound to any coherent political agenda. Terrorism scholar Walter Laqueur claims that terrorism’s only successes throughout history have been gained against Western or Western-style democratic governments and “ineffective, obsolete or half-hearted dictatorships,” but never against totalitarian regimes (171). In all cases, according to Laqueur, terrorism thrives on a “free-floating activism” which is “populist, frequently nationalist, intensive in character, but also vague and confused” (172). Such a thesis severely downplays the power and
cohesion of the political agenda of anyone who resorts to terrorism, a recourse that Laqueur sees as borne out of desperation and ignorance on the part of the agents.

From the French Revolution up to the late nineteenth century, “terrorist” was largely a tactical term given, carelessly in many cases, to both armed or unarmed leftist ideologues and apolitical rabblerousers alike. Much sensational news was published about the various “dynamite outrages” in newspapers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but little political analysis was offered. Most often these agents were chalked up as demagogues, fanatics, and foreigners, and their behaviors all contributed to their being caricatured as such. Such simplifying explanatory logic is doubtless also used in the twenty-first century, but it came to have an increasingly pejorative meaning as the twentieth century progressed. A stable definition of terrorism is not possible using any set of technical definitions. Yet, it’s highly problematic in practice to yoke together anyone who commits acts of violence as “terrorist” without accounting for differences in their motives and intentions, and for the meaning that this term will hold for its audience in its time and place when it emerges into public discourse.⁸

In all its forms, terrorism acts in defiance of, or in collusion with, the powers of the regime. Many theorists have charged that violence is inherent in the sovereign power of the nation-state, which by its very nature perpetrates and perpetuates terror itself. This view can be attributed in the context of modern statecraft at least as far back as Thomas Hobbes and Edmund Burke, who, in his denunciation of the French Revolution, despaired that terror and power are indistinguishable. According to such views, the modern nation-state acts as a sovereign that holds the monopoly on violence, and which alone can legitimate its use. The sovereign state, while sometimes acting overtly through
displays of violent repression, most often sublimates its violence to preserve the smooth and efficient workings of its governing apparatus. In addition to the sovereign state’s power to declare war, it has the power to suspend constitutional law in cases of war. This suspension of law in emergencies is the state of exception which Carl Schmitt first legitimized in modern political discourse and which Giorgio Agamben later theorized in the context of modern biopolitics. With its monopoly on violence, the sovereign state proscribes the privatized use of violence by substate actors in many, if not in all cases.

Such paradigms of state violence can be readily applied to illiberal, totalitarian regimes, but many theorists have also called specific attention to the violence inscribed in the governing dynamics of the liberal state as well. Talal Asad claims that the “compassion” of the liberal state is necessarily mixed with violence. Asad explains that the state may commit inhumane acts upon its subjects since it has the power to deem what is legally necessary for the greater good of the state, but terroristic violence, on the official level, can never be justified in this sense. Indeed, one state may go so far as to decimate the civilians and infrastructure of another state—thereby inflicting far more damage than any terrorist attack could—but this can be “legitimated” by international statecraft and intergovernmental consensus. By this system of official legitimation, personal qualms of conscience and guilt for killing others can be seen as a mark of grace for the soldiers of state-sanctioned armies, who bore the awful responsibility of having to carry out these justified killings. Such sentiment, though, can never be seen to apply to the “terrorists” or to soldiers in “illegitimate” armies of any kind. Asad thereby makes the radical-seeming claim that the terrorist attack, and the suicide bombing in particular, actually mirrors or parodies the violence that the state wields upon its subjects in more
subtle forms. The terrorists thus privatize this violence and make it manifest for all to see, and to use themselves. As I will explain further on, such acts can be viewed in terms of their spectacularity, as the attack is supposed to make a definite statement that defies the state in its power to sublimate and legitimate its own violence. Such acts can also be viewed in their theatricality, in that the public situations they create draw everyone into the public drama that erupts, and thus the normal state of affairs is in some way altered.

Terrorism has persisted as a threat to modern society coincidental to the novel’s development as a dominant literary genre. Thus, it would seem natural that novels that treat social and political concerns in their time would also treat terrorism as a matter of clear and present interest. Any of these aspects of terrorism would seem to make rich ground for fiction, a craft that deals in indeterminacy and ambiguity: the moral and ethical justifications for the act of terrorism, the questions of the innocence or guilt of its victims, and the overdetermining pathos of the terrorist act upon all of its primary and secondary victims, to name just a few.

1. The Terrorism Novel as Metagene

Can a work of fiction, then, with its multiple levels of irony, and its heteroglossia of clamoring voices, be a politically suitable means for demystifying terrorism, of taking existing discourses about terrorism used by both the terrorists and their detractors and showing the many competing interests at stake where acts of political and politicized violence are occurring? Some writers are attuned to the moral and political complexities of public conflicts in their time and choose to address these quandaries in their fiction. Indeed, there have been some novelists who have made defining statements about
political phenomena in their time through their fiction, and these works gain permanence through topical canonization. Harriet Beecher Stowe concertedly addressed the topic of slavery in 1851 with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; Upton Sinclair urban workers’ plight in 1906 with *The Jungle*; Ralph Ellison American race relations in 1952 with *Invisible Man*. All of these works defined their authors’ careers, and all of these works have been made to stand as powerful cultural testament to such imminent social phenomena. The political content in these works is manifest. Though these novels by no means had the last word on these issues, they raised public awareness of inherent injustices in conspicuous ways.

Similarly, George Orwell’s *1984* and Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* have been hailed as making the definitive literary statement upon the totalitarian state, which has set the tone for fictive discourse upon totalitarianism, and modern governmentality of all sorts, ever since these novels were published in the 1940s. Koestler and Orwell wrote their novels at the very time when the totalitarian state had emerged as a life-shaping force, whose power was experienced by those who lived and were imprisoned in such conditions (as Koestler, more so than Orwell, had). The totalitarian state, despite the particulars of right or left, political agents, and nations, can be seen to act uniformly by instilling fear in the populace—fear of reprisals, imprisonment, execution for acts of rebellion, whether by speaking out, publishing subversive materials, engaging in clandestine political operations, exercising one’s own freedom to worship, celebrate, marry, or procreating as they see fit when these practices are proscribed by the regime. Orwell’s novel helped conceptualize the totalitarian state for the rest of the twentieth century in a form that has become much more accessible and widely read than the growing volume of non-fiction work on the topic. In their novels of totalitarianism, the
technique that Koestler and Orwell both employed amounts to a form of literary naturalism, in which their characters’ agency and options are severely determined by the governmental forces surrounding them, in the same way that the naturalist novels of the early twentieth century conspicuously used societal and natural forces to determine the actions of their characters. Terrorism, by contrast, with its ever-mutable, indefinable nature, has taken so many forms, perpetrated by so many agents in so many societies since the late nineteenth century, that it’s difficult to represent the phenomenon comprehensively in fiction.

The intersection of literature with political analysis has always been cause for censure by scholars of both camps. Indeed, some scholars of terrorism question the ability of fiction writers to provide any useful insight into terrorism at all. Walter Laqueur dismisses the insight into terrorism that fiction could possibly provide, claiming that “[w]hile experience and factual knowledge is not necessarily the precondition for a great work of art, terrorists who are the product of a fertile imagination alone are of greater interest to the student of literature than to the student of terrorism” (196-97). Contrary to Kimball’s aforementioned claim that the terrorism novel cannot comprehend the insatiable evil of the modern-day terrorist, Laqueur claims that actual terrorists are almost never particularly intelligent or interesting: “[o]n the whole, terrorists are neither very attractive nor are they monsters; most of them seem to be bored and boring people” (202). Laqueur dismissed Conrad in that “[t]here have been Verlocs and Ossipons at all times and in all countries, but an analysis of their thoughts and actions, however intrinsically interesting, is of no help in understanding why a young man or woman may join a Latin American terrorist group, the IRA or Abu Nidal” (195). For Kimball, fiction
renders the evil of the terrorists too banal; for Laqueur, fiction renders the terrorists much more interesting than they actually are.

Literary critics who enter into popular discourse do, in fact, claim that certain novelists provide a useful critical lens through which political events, similar in nature but happening in different times, can be revealingly viewed and interpreted. Geoffrey Galt Harpham claims in the conclusion to *The Character of Criticism* (2006), titled “Criticism in a State of Terror,” that Edward Said’s critical responses to 9/11 are hallmark examples of literary criticism that explicitly critiqued the political hysteria of the day. Harpham claims that Said was uniquely able to critique the 9/11 attacks and the events that followed due to Said’s own lifelong education in literature and the deep conceptual insight that literary examples gave him into such events: “Perhaps one reason Said was so immediately able to marshal his resources…was that his imagination had been so thoroughly prepared for the incomprehensible event by his reading of Conrad” (154). In his op-ed piece in *The Nation* from October 22, 2001, “The Clash of Ignorance” Said claimed that “[i]t was Conrad, more powerfully than any of his readers at the end of the nineteenth century could have imagined, who understood that the distinctions between civilized London and ‘the heart of darkness’ quickly collapsed in extreme situations, and that the heights of European civilization could instantaneously fall into the most barbarous practices without preparation or transition” (ibid.). Conrad gave Said piercing insight into the ways that governments wage war and commit otherwise legally sanctioned acts of murder and destruction, such as the War on Terror launched in the months after 9/11. In that same piece, Said claimed that “[i]t was Conrad also, in *The Secret Agent*…who described terrorism’s affinity for abstractions like ‘pure science’ (and
by extension for ‘Islam’ or ‘the West’), as well as the terrorist’s ultimate moral degradation” (ibid. 155). Said credits Conrad with deep knowledge of the politicized use of moral absolutes, which Said saw acting in uncannily similar ways in the cases of both bin Laden and the Bush administration almost one hundred years later.

For Harpham, the upshot of criticism’s engagement with terror is to “generate a reinvigorated interest in the large issues of citizenship, justice, and human flourishing that normally remain deeply implicit in criticism,” thus spurring “a commitment to a kind of thinking that transcends disciplinary categories and the relatively narrow range of issues that dominate academic discourse” (157). In “soliciting or calling out personal resources that have not been and cannot be defined by professional training or contexts,” Harpham claims that “terror and the threat of terror have also challenged, refined, and expanded the characters of those critics who have answered that call” (ibid.). Harpham charges that “[s]tate-sponsored proclamations of terror have thus provoked in response individual acts of criticism that have invoked principles higher than the state”; therefore, criticism is politically consequential in that it “enables and structures intellectual and imaginative growth in those who can discover in themselves the capacity to respond to the turbulence of the world in a manner at once passionate, focused, independent, and disciplined” (ibid.). Harpham praises Said for executing criticism in such a rigorous and socially consequential way in the public discourse in which he participated. For Said, Conrad used his literary gifts of fiction writing in just the same way, invoking “principles higher than the state” that illuminated conceptually similar political events a century later. Thus, the literary critic and the novelist can both serve aptly as political critics.
What conditions need to pertain, then, in order for a novel written roughly one hundred years earlier, in a much different time and place, to be cited as an apt guide for interpreting the political events of the present day? Pseudo-mystical claims that the author is Seer, clairvoyant, and possessing some sort of divining power to see into the conditions of all of history, can be dismissed outright. Yet, *The Secret Agent* has been cited throughout the twentieth century whenever terrorism is seen as a clear and present danger. In the years since the 9/11 attacks, then, numerous critics apart from Said have appraised Conrad’s novel for offering crucial insight into the phenomenon of terrorism and the psyches of the terrorist subject. And among the works of literary criticism that appraised Conrad, many of them were written before 9/11.¹⁰

Terrorism as a societal phenomenon appears in the background of a small number of novels since the late nineteenth century. Indeed, the then-recent attacks committed by the Narodnaya Volaya, the group of Russian nihilists of the 1860s and 1870s, are mentioned in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, and acts of terrorism carried out by the Fenians, including the then-infamous Phoenix Park murders, are mentioned several times in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The presence of terrorist activities in these novels may be seen to appear only as epiphenomena of social upheavals and changing times, and may be treated as mere historical curiosities in these novels that have been studied for their literary value in many other respects. The presence of these events does not necessarily make these “terrorist novels” since these events do not directly bear upon the main narrative current in any significant way. Even the terrorist act itself can be presented in any particular moment of jarring violence in a text that otherwise deals with terrorism as a phenomenon only marginally.
There are also distinctions to be made along the lines of popular and “elite” fiction among novels that deal with terrorism explicitly. By the early twenty-first century, “terrorism fiction” could perhaps be considered a popular form of genre fiction, or perhaps a subgenre of the political thriller or the action thriller. Certainly, many popular authors writing in these subgenres have incorporated terrorism into their plots extensively. In these works, the “terrorists” are usually rendered as diabolical villains, dashing, romantically attractive, sometimes exotic, and evil. The history of popular terrorist fiction extends back to the 1880s, in Victorian-era potboilers like Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Dynamiters* (1885), Donald MacKay’s *The Dynamite Ship* (1888), and Ignatius Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column* (1891). Contemporary popular terrorist novels include Tom Clancy’s Jack Ryan series, including best-sellers like *Patriot Games* (1987), *Clear and Present Danger* (1990), and *The Sum of All Fears* (1991), the international spy agencies in Robert Ludlum’s *The Bourne Trilogy* (1980-90), and the terrorists in an ever-growing body of films and TV series, notably *24* and *Homeland*. In many of these cases of popular fiction, though, terrorism serves as the pretext for crime, detective, or otherwise psychological thrillers, and the authors may make no attempts to explore the political or psychological complexities of the terrorists in any depth. In *The Godfather and American Culture*, Chris Messenger points out that popular texts are most often read for their plot rather than for any sort of critique of ironic technique per se (35-36). In popular novels, terrorist acts serve merely as typical plot devices just like the violence of criminals, serial killers, and monsters of all sorts, and don’t necessarily add to the critical discourse on these phenomena at the time.
Granted, no one will ever confuse Joseph Conrad with Tom Clancy. Yet, in discussing another form of genre fiction, the horror novel, Noel Carroll astutely observes in *Paradoxes of the Heart* that horror in fiction is most often apolitical by nature. “Conceptual and moral orders—and the cultural schemes thereof—are not equivalent to repressive social orders” (203). Attempts to read horror novels for either the emancipatory or reactionary cultural critique that their authors are supposedly making is in most cases misleading, as Carroll claims that most horror novelists did not intend to make any sort of political critique through writing in that genre. This case is analogous to the critique of popular terrorism fiction. Yet, terrorism usually *is* political by nature, and political grievances are brought up in the fiction, however generic. Can we confuse the presence in these fictions of government villains, surveillance, arms dealing, or bombings of civilians with a critique thereof?

One of the major ethical and philosophical problems that a novel about political violence must inevitably pose, then, is how society reacts when faced with a threat to the established order from within. This would presumably serve as the litmus test for that author’s political views, and show that author’s critique of his or her own society, in stark relief. Certainly the novel can address the oppression wrought upon political subjects by social and political forces in overt or subtle ways, and this can arguably be seen in any work of fiction, as posited by numerous twentieth-century literary critics. The novel may expose the complexities of these social, cultural, and political circumstances that may in turn be seen to drive some subjects to act in desperate, violent ways. Such an exploration would, in effect, point out the flaws and inconsistencies in the liberal system that strives
to maintain its equilibrium while prohibiting the privatized use of violence among its citizens.

Foucault claimed that the all-pervasive forms of surveillance and governmentality are the modus operandi for modern liberal societies, a general outlook that has often been deemed anti-humanist and which would seem to run contrary to the Enlightenment precepts of liberalism. Through a Foucauldian lens, David A. Miller claims in *The Novel and the Police* that Victorian novels acted in subtle ways to model the ideal liberal response to “delinquent,” “criminal” threats to dominant social order through the novels’ rigorous attention to the details of everyday bourgeois life, which acted in effect as a field in which criminal behavior could eventually be subsumed into the policing society when overt forms of policing could not deal with criminal activity. The reader’s expectations for normalcy, for equilibrium, for law-abiding life, would contain the impulses to rebellion, showing that such rebellion really had nowhere to go, and nothing to realistically achieve. The reader’s expectations and hopes may be already predisposed in such as way as to wish to see the subversive threats contained.

Yet when political topics, and especially political violence, are treated overtly as major themes of a novel, the author must engage with the existing political order in some way that amounts to more than voicing the dominant ideological currents, either wittingly or unwittingly. In *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction*, Margaret Scanlan claims that novelists who write about terrorism are in fact staging, if not actively waging, their own wars against political orders in their own works. Scanlan explicitly connects writing and political activism, arguing that novelists’ awareness of ideology has only served to drastically diminish the writer’s expectations of the power of
human agency and the progressive power of writing in particular in the late twentieth century (4). Scanlan, then, claims that the imagined act of terrorism serves as the crisis-point that allows a writer to assess his or her own political commitments and attempt to answer questions about the writer’s ability to understand, respond to, and influence politics (7). In this pessimistic view, the terrorist may serve as a fantasy double for the novelist, enacting public action where no action can occur for the author. In the ideal world of the novel—and perhaps even in the objective world—the terrorist’s act of violence inevitably brings about a reaction, and the public cannot help but take notice—but in the end the author can only fantasize that his words are causing such catastrophe in the world. Every author a revolutionary, if only in his or her own fictive world.

In a view more objectively politically empowering for the novelist, Alex Houen argues in *Terrorism and Modern Literature from Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson* that the author of terrorism fiction can recapitulate the inherent explosiveness of terrorism’s violence, as well as call attention to the inherent instability of the discursive figurations of terrorism, in ways that no other discourse can. Going back to Conrad, Houen claims that certain astute authors who write about terrorism have sought to develop “new tropological and stylistic strategies in response” to the phenomenon (18). Where terrorism and textuality both closely inform each other, as both are bound up in the same structures of power, terrorism’s temporary rupture of daily life can be replicated through literary strategies that “question the kinds of structural aetiology of terrorism and its mediation that have been predominant in terrorism studies” (275). For Houen, the figures of terrorism “present their own interpretive and affective dynamics that are nevertheless entangled in specific cultural contaminations” (ibid.). The “literary” author of terrorism
will thus attempt to show just how unstable these culturally determined representations really are through recreating these effects in his fiction.

Scanlan and Houen have usefully isolated several disparate twentieth-century writers and texts and analyzed the logic of terrorism, and the narrative role of many aspects of terrorism, in these works. In the same manner, I am identifying a set of twentieth- and twenty-first century novels and categorizing them as “terrorism fiction,” a term which calls for some further explanation. Irving Howe, in his 1957 *Politics and the Novel*, defined the “political novel” as “any novel in which we take to be dominant political ideas or the political milieu; a novel which permits this assumption without thereby suffering any radical distortion and with possibility of some analytical profit” (17, italics his). Howe took as the subject of his study the relationship between politics and literature, for which “political novel” is, as he says, “convenient shorthand to suggest the kind of novel in which this relationship is interesting enough to warrant investigation” (19). In a manner similar to Howe, I am addressing the relationship of terrorism to literature in these works. Therefore, following Howe’s model, I consider the “terrorism novel” to be any novel in which we take terrorism to be a dominant theme. Terrorism can certainly be seen as the dominant theme in many of these works, but I am also critiquing works that do not address the topic so overtly, in which terrorism and terrorist agents are lurking in the background. In such works, terrorism serves as the raw material, the manifest content, that any work of fiction takes as its own as the author creates a fictive world. The fact that this material appears in the real world at all, and is invariably inscribed within a political grid itself, may be seen to politically overdetermine the work
itself, leaving it open to a politically forward critique, a set of political valences, that perhaps the author never actually intended.

By my definition, the “terrorism novel” serves as a metagenre of novels, in the same way that the classifications “political novel” or “psychological novel” serve to critically foreground certain focuses of critique in an otherwise expansive field of novels of all genres and periods. In the sense that the political novel treats political themes in a way that warrants critical attention, the terrorism novel may also be considered a species of political novel when political action takes the form of violence that may be seen as terrorism. In psychological novels told from the perspective of characters whose own emotional and psychological conflicts organize the narrative itself, if the violence these characters resort to, or become the victims of, takes the form of terrorism, then the terrorism novel becomes a species of psychological novel. In this same way, the terrorism novel may serve as a subgenre of the action/adventure thriller in popular fiction as well. It is not particularly useful to establish the terrorism novel as a discreet species unto itself. The terrorism novels I study, then, are in many cases dissimilar to each other by style, technique, and of course time period, yet they are bound to each other by the theme of politically oriented violence that can be deemed terrorism, however many different forms this violence takes. All of these novels, then, analyze terrorism in ways that critique both the agents who resort to violence and the reactions of the state and the populace affected.
2. The Emotional Stakes of Terrorism: Theater and Spectacle

[T]he spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity. Likewise, lived reality suffers the material assaults of the spectacle’s mechanisms of contemplation, incorporating the spectacular order and lending that order positive support. Each side therefore has its share of objective reality. And every concept, as it takes its place on one side or the other, has no foundation apart from its transformation into its opposite: reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. (14)

–Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (1967)

The moment language bodies forth the reality of pain, it makes all further statements and interpretations seem ludicrous and inappropriate, as hollow as the world content that disappears in the head of the person suffering. (60)


More than any other type of violence, and certainly more than any other form of warfare against a people or a regime, terrorism operates by the dynamic of fear, which gives it a power far disproportionate to its actual ability to harm. It is the fiction we create, which the terrorists have set up for us, that allows us to imagine situations in which we can be the next victim of a spectacular attack. “Terrorism provides the chamber of horrors in which imagined events are as possible as factual ones,” claim Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass in Terror and Taboo, “and the latter are frequently perceived, in their senseless atrocity, as a kind of fictional reality” (4). In our daily lives we become drawn in to the fictive reality of terror, and this reality, this new frame of perception that we are compelled to adopt, compels its own action accordingly.

Zulaika and Douglass claim that terrorism works by “imposing an apocalyptic frame in which suspension of disbelief appears to be the rational course and no commentary as to its discursive configuration seems relevant” (30). Terrorism acts on a visceral, almost superstitious level with “performative plenitude, the culturally embedded premises of a magical sort of activism” (66), rendering “as if by contagion, single acts of sparse violence into alarming symbolic statements of all-out challenge to the established order” (142-43). In this way, “the more mysterious, threatening, and incomprehensible
the terror, the greater the impact and enhanced audience appeal” (4). Victims imagine any
total number of hidden enemies who could attack in any number of different scenarios, and
thus the fear that the terrorists engender gives them the perception of power far beyond
their actual ability to act.

Acts of terrorism rely on public attention to give them this power to captivate the
public imagination. Terrorist acts cannot occur in secret, without a widespread audience
to bear witness in some way. In this way, modern terrorism has a symbiotic relationship
with mass media—images of bombings and destruction of property must be broadcast by
TV and Internet news promiscuously. The power of such spectacles is visceral and
immediate, and by virtue of the emotional reaction the spectacle incites, it obliterates any
impulse for thought and analysis in its moment. Yet the power of the spectacle to shock
ought not be taken for granted. In Stages of Terror, Anthony Kubiak ascribes the power
of the spectacle to terrify to its use of the “phobic object” contained therein. Images of
grievous bodily injury, then, serve as phobic objects in this sense—signs that signify the
experience which cannot be wholly known to anyone else, but which suggest a pain that
the audience can only contemplate sympathetically, through identification with the
victims.

All spectacles with the power to shock are endowed with some form of phobic
object; yet the phobic object may obscure the underlying meaning and intention of the
agent’s message. In The Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord claimed that the spectacle
in the modern world is “the material reconstruction of the religious illusion” that bring
the “cloud-enshrouded entities” that captivate the believer “down to earth” (17-18).
However, rather than serve as occasion for shared communion in the manner of religious
rituals, Debord claimed that the spectacle actually widens the gap between viewers, as spectators are “linked by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another,” uniting a crowd of viewers “only in its separateness” (22).

“Phobic object” may mean any number of different things to any number of different people, and there is no guarantee that the intended meaning of the spectacle will be received by anyone in particular. Debord claims that lived reality becomes subsumed by “the spectacle’s mechanisms of contemplation”; thus, the myriad possible ways the spectacle can be viewed affects human interaction itself. Though Debord was critiquing capitalism’s power to captivate audiences of potential consumers through spectacle, the same can be said for any widely disseminated spectacle that has the power to captivate attention. Images of warfare, grievous bodily injuries, and the fetish of weapons are compelling spectacles for anyone who promotes these images for their own purposes, whether it’s the state military or insurgent guerillas.

When physical pain is signified, or becomes part of a sign, the phobic object of the gross physical injury and destruction becomes explicit. In The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry claims that “[t]he moment language bodies forth the reality of pain, it makes all further statements and interpretations seem ludicrous and inappropriate, as hollow as the world content that disappears in the head of the person suffering” (60). For the one who suffers in the moment, the experience of pain becomes all-consuming, rendering discourse upon the pain “ludicrous and inappropriate” (ibid.). Scarry claims that the speaker resorts to attempts to signify actual physical pain when the power of words fails them, “only on behalf of a cultural artifact or symbolic fragment or made thing (a sentence) that is without any other basis in material reality” (127). Thus, the body and
bodily sensations are used to signify concepts when there is a “crisis of substantiation”—supplementing meaning in a way that captures its audience’s attention viscerally (127). In a political message that uses images of physical pain and suffering to express its points (the toil and sacrifice of those who came before us, the evil unleashed upon the innocent by our enemies, the suffering we will make our enemies experience) images of bodily harm become “disembodied cultural fragments” in themselves—they mean plenty of things to their viewers, but they’re meant to serve specific political and cultural purposes. Images of bodily harm have an “unanchored quality” that has nothing to do with the actual unalterable physical damage suffered (ibid.). In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes claimed that the symbols contained in any political melodrama—characters, events, and actions embodying absolutes of right and wrong, good and evil—all attempt to reify the abstract concepts contained within myth. Barthes calls myth “de-politicized speech” which gives a “natural and eternal justification” for the temporal political concepts, the ideologemes, contained in the act of myth-making (143). The form of the sign itself accrues its own socially determined “knowledge,” the sociocultural values that a sign takes on, where “what is invested in the concept is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality; in passing from the meaning to the form, the image loses some knowledge: the better to receive the knowledge in the concept” (119). No political regime has the power to control the uses and reception of the image, though, and with the image’s “unanchored quality,” Scarry says, “the symbolic claims or issues change with great ease” (127). Thus, there’s a fundamental disconnect between the universal experience of pain and the vagaries of the function of the politicized image of pain.
It’s one thing to capture one’s attention with a public display of violence, but quite another thing altogether to orchestrate people to respond in a particular way. The audience for a terrorist attack moves about in a broad public theater, in which everyone is a player in an unscripted play. Panic or anger or indifference are possible reactions, which might or might not be what the agents intended. Aida Hozic, in her essay “The Inverted World of Spectacle: Social and Political Responses to Terrorism,” differentiates between terrorism’s “spectacularity” and “theatricality.” With the spectacularity of terrorism, “actors and the audience…are physically separated, and participation is replaced by the observation of breathtaking events which can be admired or feared” (66-67). In taking up Debord’s theorizing of the spectacle, which by nature only seems to unite the audience but actually emphasizes the division of the audience members due to the multiple possible meanings that accrue to the spectacle, Hozic claims that spectacular action “generally complies with the secret desires of the audience; it is that which the public is willing to see and it induces ecstasy, not catharsis, among those who attend it” (67). The spectacle may serve as a form of entertainment rather than alarm. Sentiment, in all cases, is directly attributable to one’s subject-position. Certain viewers will feel certain emotions about certain objects, but not everyone can possibly feel the same emotions about the same objects. For example, certain objects may be used in a narrative for the supposedly universal sentimental appeal they evoke, and indeed women, children, the elderly, the ill, the mentally infirm, and animals have been evoked in this way throughout the history of the novel and film. Their victimization may cause an extreme sympathetic response, and extreme revulsion for the ones inflicting the violence, among their audience. However, such responses are inevitably culturally constructed. One
viewer’s subject position within any given society may predispose him to react with extreme pity and revulsion in seeing a child killed. By contrast, another viewer’s subject position may predispose him to react to the scene with indifference, if not ridicule.

Theater, by contrast, “compels the audience to re-examine its own deeply ingrained world views by confronting it with a sort of existential play on stage” (Hozic 67). The theater of terrorism has behind it the impulse to induce action of a certain sort, “to display by immediate example that the recreation of the world is feasible” (ibid.). Hozic claims that theatrical elements are used in populist movements, revolutions, and upheavals, “the tendency to include as many actors as possible, to annul real time and establish a new one” (ibid.). The theatrical action thereby creates a purposeful indeterminacy in society that defies the regime’s attempts to govern, and this can be brought about by a threat just as much as by an actual assault (and perhaps even more so). In many cases the spectacularity and theatricality of the terrorist act may overlap, and a spectacular attack, such as the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001 to use an extreme example, may also carry with it a long-lasting theatrical residue, in which much of the world was thrown into panic, and U.S. foreign and domestic policy was thus militarized against terrorism in all its potential forms in the years following. The effects of the terrorist act may occur exactly as the terrorist intends, especially if panic is the objective, or they may unfold in the public in ways quite different from what the agents intended. However, the act is inevitably subject to overdetermination by its audience, and public discourses can influence the ways the public interprets and responds to the act. Even when the terrorists’ message is clearly stated, the various disciplines can determine
the ways in which the agents are viewed, casting doubt on their political legitimacy and even their mental and emotional stability.

The experience of surviving the terrorist attack—that is, bearing witness to it and continuing on with one’s life in the society apparently under attack—becomes theatrical in effect. Hozic claims that theatricality and spectacularity are similar in that “both can be used as forms of expression for symbolic political power, as indispensable elements of any political activity in search of popular support” (67-68). Yet, the two work by fundamentally different means. As Debord observed, spectacle increases the gap between the actor and audience, but also may serve as a form that induces pleasure in the audience, thereby palliating conflict and tension. Theatrical action, by contrast, “questions everything, reopens hidden conflicts and taboos, and attempts to mobilize, not satisfy, the audience” (68).

Anyone can feel something upon witnessing a bus bombing or mall shooting spree, no matter how distant we were to the victims or how unthreatened our own personal safety may actually be. The emotion in all of its dimensions associated with the spectacle is gratuitous, the power of the spectacle unearned. By contrast, terrorism’s theater—the actions that people take in response to the terrorist act—is much more complex, governed by endless contingencies. In becoming unwitting players in the drama that the spectacle has unleashed, the audience members may very well respond with panic and hysteria, countering with retaliatory violence of their own that may easily be misdirected at the regime that engendered the violence, or failed to police it, or at social scapegoats standing in proxy for the terrorists. In many cases, this is undoubtedly the reaction that the terrorists intended. However, in the public theater of terrorism, people’s
noblest instincts may also incite them to act in helping the victims, reflecting upon the total situation, and addressing the underlying problems. Neither response can be guaranteed writ large, and a complex mixture of responses will most likely result in any situation. The terrorist act in both its spectacular and theatrical dimensions most often incites fear, horror, and anger—responses that are visceral, untrained, immediate, and incited gratuitously in these cases. The act may bring about careful, measured, considered responses in the theater that results, though these impulses may be much more tentative and fragile.

The emotional effects of the experience of terror, and the infliction of pain upon others, demands closer theoretical analysis. In his Theory of Moral Sentiments, Adam Smith claimed that harmonious social relations are maintained by the sympathetic identification with others, of imagining ourselves in the position of others and thereby doing what we can to avoid inflicting misfortune upon them. In States of Sympathy, Elizabeth Barnes draws the implications of Smith’s claim for the act of reading, where, in being presented with a fictionalized rendition of a person, reading enables sympathetic identification to take place, and our imaginations allow us to “become the very person whose actions are represented to us” (22). Smith said that “the object of scrutiny” must “elicit sympathy from the viewer” (ibid.), and this is done most readily through the experience of the object’s suffering, to which the viewer responds viscerally. Thus, “only when another’s ‘agonies’ are ‘brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own’, do they ‘begin at last to affect us’” (21-22). Sympathy can thus be seen as the “action wing” of sentiment. Sympathy for others may not compel action, but it can give one pause, and compel one not to kill or harm. Similarly, in his Enquiry
Concerning the Principles of Morals, David Hume claimed that sympathy is not so much a feeling for someone else, but a reproduction of their feelings (Townsend 99). According to Hume biographer Dabney Townsend, “the paradigm of sympathy” is my wincing when you are cut: while the viewer may take pleasure in the fact that someone else suffers, this pleasure is derived from the fact that the viewer can imagine the experience of the pain of being cut in the first place (ibid.).

According to Townsend, Hume’s version of sympathy accounts for an audience’s ability to respond to what an artist expresses in fiction (100). For Hume, “one does not imagine fictions; one experiences them” (104); thus, “[f]ictions are not deceptions” but rather “quite real representations of certain subjects for sentiment” (ibid.). Hume’s sympathy “provides a way to account for the initial effects of fictions as well as their ability to affect an audience by acknowledging a more or less direct transfer of ideas on the basis of the external expression and clues provided by the other person” (101). Thus, in fiction, Hume’s sympathy must be incited towards the fictitious emotions therein, “not only because of the transference of the portrayed events to the audience but also because of the range of passions that can be depicted” (ibid.). Crucially, then, “[w]hat one responds to is not simply the events; one also responds to the portrayal of emotions” that elicit an emotional response in the reader (ibid.). For Hume, “imagination” is “the way one converts ideas back into impressions” (104). “For imagination to have an affect, it must be related to events, even if the events are fictional” (ibid.). For Hume, “applied to reported news or events, ‘The imagination is sure to be affected’” (ibid.).

Hume’s and Smith’s theorizing of fear and sympathy for others has crucial implications for the ways that authors construct their fiction in presenting scenes of
violence and suffering. The author may draw an affective response from the reader by presenting scenes of violence and victimization in compelling ways, but there can be no guarantee that it will have any further-ranging effects. On a fundamental level, the reader of fiction realizes that the events in the novel are fictive. Contrary to the intentions of a politically motivated author, situations of maddening injustice or scenes of shocking brutality in fiction may only reinforce the reader’s feelings of helplessness or resignation, or, as Laura Hinton surmised in *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy*, the reader’s sadomasochistic pleasure in seeing others suffer. Hinton claims that sympathy only works when the spectator is “near and direct, but still preserving the spectator’s autonomy and intactness,” requiring “the very vividness of the ‘shimmering’ horrific image so that its spectator may be assured of his own shimmering luster and representational survival, his own mastering power” (234). Hume’s physics of sympathy—imagination of another’s pain—can be rooted in pleasure at seeing the other suffer from the very outset. An audience may have an appetite for even the most gruesome of spectacles; thus any spectacle is potentially “a form which pleases the audience” which may “reduce[] conflict and social tension,” contrary to its actors’ intentions (68). Moreover, Hozic claims that “if something is presented as a spectacle then it is presented in a bearable form” (78). “Instead of seeing the real death, instead of confronting something dangerous and different, instead of experiencing a real horror, the audience is faced with a far more pleasant substitute” (ibid.). Moreover, the horror at such spectacles can always be avoided or tuned out. Scarry acknowledges that “the wound on the shelf, damaged head, a torn off arm, an open belly will stare out at an observer by the closet door and flood him with nausea of awe and terror, overwhelm him, bring him even to his knees as though it
were a gun rather than an open gash poised in his direction” (77). However, the observer realizes that “if he could just unfix his gaze, raise or drop his eyes in a small arc of vision, there would be other objects on the shelves and other closets and other rooms filled with sunlight and newspapers and a sleeping cat” (ibid.).

I do not mean to suggest, then, that novels in any way compel political action among a reading public by portraying scenarios of violence that create undesirable social circumstances (i.e., suffering victims). Suffering, especially fictional suffering, could just as easily be a form of entertainment as much as it is a willed experience of moral outrage that the reader subjects herself to. The value of studying novels that treat public acts of violence, then, is to show the social structures underpinning acts of public fear as played out in the fictive events they portray. In *The Vehement Passions*, Philip Fisher claims that “narrative and the passions share a common interest in the moments of time, however exceptional they might be among lived moments, in which the vehemence of grief or anger or fear or shame or joy makes unmistakable once again the structure of a world in which there is one and only one will, one and only one person” (252). Fisher claims that narrative is “innately perspectival in time and circumstance” and that “narrative and the passions are, from different directions, systems for the articulation of a personal world, along with that world’s claim to be prior to and, finally, more essential than any shared, common world or “mere world” (ibid.). Ann Cvetkovich in *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* theorizes the ways sentiment operates through affective structures shaped by existing social and political forces. Cvetkovich claims that Victorian novels exercised a politics of literary sentiment (which she prefers to label “sensation”) in making an emotional appeal to readers by foregrounding scenes
of victimization, thus “transfer[ring] the apparent naturalness of feeling to its representation” in images of suffering, and thereby “consolidat[ing] the naturalness of the representation that produces that feeling” (34-35). This is the same operation in literature that Barthes and Scarry critique in the reification of political concepts as conveyed through the symbolic power of images of suffering. Any given author may make a visceral appeal to his or her audience by charging a literary metaphor with emotion, making the underlying meaning of that metaphor seem as natural and reactive as the body’s reaction to pain. This amounts to the fetishization of the representation itself, as the image of violence and suffering is given the power to express the violence itself in definitive and monological terms. Such image-fetishization, in effect, occludes the true nature of the underlying system of violence.

Cvetkovich argues that sensation uses the physical images of the bodies of people who suffer as the site of the impact of social relations and political power upon subjects. Sensationalism in literature “produces the embodiment, in both the literal and figurative senses, of social structures” in a way that “not only renders them concrete, by embodying them in a single and powerful representation,” but also making the physical suffering that these structures produce seem “immediate and natural” (24). Thus, “[t]o study the politics of affect is more broadly to study the politics of cathexis and to explore how meanings are given to the energy attached to particular events and representations” (24). Crucial to Cvetkovich’s theory, then, is her assertion that affect is not a natural state that exists prior to and independently of social forces, but that “mass culture actually creates affect, by representing complex social issues in simpler and emotionally engaging terms, that is, by sensationalizing them” (28). She takes up Foucault’s view that “[l]ike sexuality, affect
should be understood as discursively constructed” and that these social constructions are “accompanied by an emphasis on sentiment, feeling, and emotion” (30). If sentiment is socially constructed, and if our visceral, sentimental reactions are made to seem natural, then the effects of sociopolitical and ideological forces upon subjects are made to seem as natural as our emotions themselves. These cases of sensation, of affectively charged violence in literature, should then be analyzed specifically for the underlying power relations represented therein.

The term I am using in the chapters that follow to describe emotion as conveyed within the narrative of fiction is “sentiment.” Sentiment as a concept in art draws upon the eighteenth-century philosophical critique advanced by Hume and Smith among others, and is most often used to pertain to a subset of novels from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that were written to draw readers’ sympathies towards very specific objects of suffering. I argue that a critical view to literary sentiment is also entirely pertinent in twentieth-century fiction as well. In Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel, Philip Fisher offers a compelling study of literary sentiment’s sociopolitical power in the context of an antebellum American audience. Fisher claims that the nineteenth-century American novel served as a primary instrument for ideological subject-formation, an instrument that helped shape publicly oriented subjectivity and sentiment. Fisher claims that certain forms of the nineteenth-century American popular novel—the historical novel, the sentimental novel, and the naturalist novel—cleared the path for the dominant culture to install “new habits of moral perception” which would henceforth be remembered as facts, thus enabling a cultural revision of the social, cultural, and political “hard facts” that were formerly being
disputed. Fisher sees sentimental literature as a vehicle for liberal humanism’s ongoing project of extending sympathy, and ultimately recognition of humanity, to those previously denied it, most notably black slaves. Sentiment redescribes extant social ills such as domestic ruptures, as can be seen in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s casting the sorrows of slavery in terms of the unnecessary separation of the families of slaves and slaveholders alike. Fisher sees nineteenth-century sentiment as operating strongest where the capacity for action is blocked, where the audience is supposed to come to anguish at the very moment when they realize they are powerless to prevent the suffering they see in the story. This aroused sentiment, then, acts as a goad for taking action in the political world, where such action is impossible in the world of the novel. After all, death is universal and unites whites and blacks alike, and many of Stowe’s readers presumably had lost a child in early age. Stowe therefore highlighted the experience of the death of the child to bridge the sympathetic gap between white readers and black slaves. With so many unnecessary deaths brought about through slavery, Stowe showed exactly how desirable it would be to eradicate slavery, if only to mitigate the toll it takes on the families involved.

Granted, Fisher’s analysis here is concerned only with the nineteenth-century sentimental novel and does not appraise subsequent forms of literary sentiment beyond the U.S. Civil War, let alone into the twentieth century, for performing the sort of socially progressive subject-formation work that he discusses. Fisher differentiated the nineteenth-century sentimental novel from what he calls the twentieth-century “romance of consciousness.” The sentimental novel was concerned with the objectivity of the sufferer, and the sympathizing witness was supposed to supply the requisite sympathy for
the sufferer as the helpless object of all sorts of physical and discursive violence. In this sense, Fisher calls the nineteenth-century sentimental novel the “romance of objects.”

Most extant criticism of literary sentiment is concerned with the nineteenth-century novel. For my part, I am not suggesting that the nineteenth-century sentimental novel is homologous with the twentieth-century terrorism novel. Of course, the social, cultural, and political situations of nineteenth-century American and British fiction should not be compared with each other, let alone with their twentieth-century successors. I believe, though, that the debate over the social, cultural, and political importance and uses of literary sentiment is still relevant no matter what the literary period concerned. The content of the novels, and the social, cultural, and political particulars invariably differ, but the philosophical stakes for the affective power of the novel does not. Indeed, the terms of the philosophical debates on this matter remain fundamentally the same, and still have their roots in the first debates over the nature and functions of sentiment going back to the Enlightenment philosophers.

The twentieth-century novel, then, may foreground both the experiences of the sufferers and the killers. Fisher claims that the twentieth-century novel is primarily psychological in orientation, and focuses on the subjectivity of the victim himself, conveying the story from the victim’s own subject position, often by the victim’s own narration. Fisher called this “romance of consciousness” the “romance of the subject.” Such fiction foregrounds abnormal psychologies, and the subject makes his own case in his own narration. In most cases, the subject is a villain who makes sympathetic appeals to his own victimhood. Fisher cites William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as the prime example of the romance of the subject, in which the entire story is narrated by
the leader of the violent slave rebellion from his jail cell prior to his execution, and the reader is invited to sympathize with Turner in his travails. Other key examples of the twentieth-century American romance of consciousness could easily include Faulkner’s *Light in August*, Wright’s *Native Son*, Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, and Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, all of which make sympathetic entreaties to the criminal or outcast subject. Fisher says this privileging of the subjectivity of the villain-as-victim is characteristic of the crime novel genre in particular, in which the “lingering over a catalogue of ordinary experience occurs primarily to give existential weight and air of reasonableness to a single act of violence which the reader, who has been placed in the position of the murderer rather than that of the victim, is encouraged to find, at least for the moment, reasonable and satisfying” (97). Fisher claims that the irony of the villain’s victimhood, and the “reasonableness” of the villain’s motives, deflates appeal for sympathy for the sufferers of the crimes that the villain-narrator commits.

The novelists I study herein, then, all use specific lucid, sublime moments of violence in their texts that seek to change the focus on the ways we as their audience view and think about the violence that’s actually committed in political conflicts. These moments in the text change the conversation on violence by foregrounding the experiences of the individual victims of terrorism, and of the emotional toll upon the killers themselves.
3. The Sense of Life and the Penetrating Imagination: From Henry James to Joseph Conrad

[I]f you haven’t, for fiction, the root of the matter in you, haven’t the sense of life and the penetrating imagination, you are a fool in the very presence of the revealed and assured; but […] if you are so armed you are not really helpless, not without your resource, even before mysteries abysmal. (48)

–Henry James, Preface the New York edition of The Princess Casamassima (1909)

The Princess Casamassima and The Secret Agent, both frequently cited as foundational novels of terrorism, both deal with radical anarchism and terrorist plotting—the assassination of a European duke in the former, the bombing of the Greenwich Observatory in the latter. Both novels vacillate between the slum tenements, the offices of government officials, and the manors of aristocrats in roughly the same time period in Victorian London (early 1880s for James; mid-1890s for Conrad). Both deal with a similar mixture of social milieu: primarily working-class, but some middle-class, and wealthy Londoners who all cross social boundaries in matters of business. However, James and Conrad chose to focus on very different social and emotional dimensions of terrorism, and Conrad’s approach was foundational for the social and political analysis that later twentieth-century explorations of terrorism in fiction would perform through focusing on the sensation of the terrorist act itself.

The Princess Casamassima is Henry James’s most overtly political novel, and is unusual for James in that contemporary radical politics and political violence serve explicitly as themes and narrative events therein. Published in 1886, the novel tells the story of Hyacinth Robinson, the orphaned son of a French charwoman, the exiled daughter of one of the French revolutionists of 1830, who killed Hyacinth’s father, an English lord. Hyacinth works as a penniless bookbinder in the slums of London whose friends have certain radical leftist political sympathies. Hyacinth eventually joins an anarchist group who pledges their allegiance to a fugitive German terrorist named
Hoffendahl, who commissions them to commit acts of terrorist murder. The princess of the title also joins the group, and impresses Hyacinth with the refined world of good breeding and high art that she willingly foreswore to destroy through her radical activities. Hyacinth, though, who had artistic sensibilities that could not be sated in his impoverished surroundings, becomes enthralled by the princess’s aristocratic lifestyle, and finds himself in a devastating moral predicament. Either he honors the vow he swore to his comrades, which would commit him to assassinate a government official, or he renounce them altogether and try to attain the life of luxury that the princess was squandering. Both choices were untenable, so Hyacinth kills himself with the very gun he was given to shoot his target.

James was primarily concerned with the psychological struggle that results from commitment to a political struggle that’s at odds with one’s cultural sensibilities. In his preface to the 1909 edition of *The Princess Casamassima*, he claimed that he attempted to convey the moral conflict of a young man caught between two social worlds with competing sets of political mores. In his “defence” of his “artistic position” in response to the scrutiny that his take on anarchism had fallen, James claimed that “the value I wished most to render and the effect I wished most to produce were precisely those of our not knowing, of society’s not knowing, but only guessing and suspecting and trying to ignore, what ‘goes on’ irreconcileably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface” (48).

James claimed that he hoped to “perhaps show the social ear as on occasion applied to the ground, or catch some gust of hot breath that I had at many an hour seemed to see escape and hover” (ibid.). James thus sued for the right of the artist to tackle any subject he so chooses. James claimed that “[m]y vision of the aspects I more or less fortunately
rendered was, exactly, my knowledge” and that “[i]f I made my appearances live, what was this but the utmost one could do with them?” (ibid.).

“It is a law of literary portrayal which first appears paradoxical, but then quite obvious,” said Georg Lukács in The Historical Novel, “that in order to bring out these social and human motives of behavior, the outwardly insignificant events, the smaller (from without) relationships are better suited than the great monumental dramas of world history” (42). In his analysis of Balzac’s historical novels, Lukács claimed that world-historical struggles are better portrayed in fiction through struggles at the level of the novel’s characters because “political content” of the historical events in the book can be “easily surveyed as a whole” and “translated directly into action” in the novel “because its human spiritual reflexes can be revealed in an obvious, straightforward way,” whereas the presentation of the “big political problems” underlying the intrigues in the novel would create “a dead and heavy ballast” (ibid.). Critics of James have also placed high critical value on the moral dilemmas in James’s novels, and appraised The Princess Casamassima for using the probing insight into the complex psychological layers of his characters, which is James’s stock-in-trade in his other works, into uncovering the moral and emotional wages of political radicalism upon a would-be assassin who happens to have inborn, refined cultural sensibilities. Peter Brooks, for example, claimed that James presented “a dramatic account of the dilemmas of moral consciousness” through Hyacinth’s inner struggles, where readers are not made to analyze the plot devices’ political content as such, but to “submit to” the “dramaturgy” and the “functioning as mechanism” alone (31).
The so-called “knowledge” that James offered on the political radicalism, though, is the source of much critical dispute. Irving Howe, for one, claimed that James did not, in fact, have “the root of the matter” in him and that he was utterly unqualified to weigh in on the political situation of his day. Howe says James had no idea about the radicals’ revolutionary agenda, nor did he even think it was important enough to present this in his novel (154). Howe claimed that “James showed himself to be brilliantly gifted at entering the behavior of political people, but he had no larger view of politics as a collective mode of action” (153). Thus, James’s novel, though purporting to offer an intimate view of the personal wages of radical activism, rings hollow in Howe’s mind because James did not provide a convincing enough account of the actual politics involved.

Crucially, though, James wrote his novel in the context of the mid-1880s, a period that saw the most widespread range of terrorist attacks ever unleashed in Europe and America and responded directly to such events. Anarchism was a growing threat and a mystery to European and American society in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Several politically oriented murders and bombings were committed by agents with questionable political loyalties. It was generally not known what, exactly their political persuasion was, whether anticolonial, socialist, anarchist, or nihilist (whatever these terms were taken to mean at the time). There were assassinations of British political figures, including the 1882 murder of Lord Frederick Cavendish, Chief Secretary of Ireland, and of Undersecretary Thomas Burke, by the Fenians in Dublin’s Phoenix Park. There were also bombings of civic targets, such as the unsuccessful bombing in 1883 of the *Times* office and the actual dynamiting of London subways in order to kill crowds of exhibition-goers, and numerous attempts in 1884 to blow up major targets such as the
Tower of London, the House of Commons, Westminster Hall, and London Bridge. All of these attacks were believed to have been launched by Irish separatists. London’s vast social and economic inequalities were cause for the outrage of international terrorist groups, as “[t]here was a general suspicion amongst the English educated classes that some internationally organized group existed which was dedicated to overturning society in its present form” (Brewer 26).

In his preface to the 1909 edition of *The Princess Casamassima*, James said that “[I]f you haven’t, for fiction, the root of the matter in you, haven’t the sense of life and the penetrating imagination, you are a fool in the very presence of the revealed and assured; but […] if you are so armed you are not really helpless, not without your resource, even before mysteries abysmal” (48). However, the operation that James performed was one of conjecture in writing about the inner lives of the radicals, and the central moral conflict in the story—Hyacinth’s struggle between political activism and cultural appreciation—is waged precisely in terms that James himself could understand.

Conrad, by contrast, *did* have intimate insight into the wages of political radicalism from a very young age, living as he did through his parents’ exile for their involvement in the failed Polish revolution of 1863. Even though James wrote *The Princess Casamassima* in the midst of a tense time of political anarchism, he does not admit in his writing to having dealt directly with any particular incidents of contemporary terrorism in his writing. Conrad, however, claimed to have been inspired by a fleeting but sensational incident in his own time in writing *The Secret Agent*. Conrad dismissed his vested interest in political radicalism while writing his novel in that he “had no idea to consider Anarchism politically—or to treat it seriously in its philosophical aspect: [but
rather] as a general manifestation of human nature in its discontent and imbecility”
(Collected Letters 354-55).

However, Conrad also knowingly, intentionally used the political materials at hand in his novel and was aware of the underlying concepts involved: concepts that directly informed the political subject matter at hand. In his Author’s Note to the 1920 edition of The Secret Agent, Conrad recounts the genesis of his own ideas for writing the novel. One day in 1905, when he and novelist Ford Madox Ford were discussing the topic of contemporary anarchism, Conrad became incensed. Specifically, they recounted the botched bombing of London’s Greenwich Observatory in 1894, and in summing up the futility of the whole enterprise, Ford claimed of the bomber (Martial Bourdin, a French immigrant who Ford somehow believed was involved in anarchist activity) who accidentally triggered the bomb prematurely and blew himself up: “Oh, that fellow was half an idiot. His sister committed suicide afterwards” (xxxvi). In the note, Conrad then recalls how he serendipitously came across the book Sidelights on the Home Rule Movement, police commissioner Sir Robert Anderson’s account of his years in Scotland Yard spent trying to police the Fenian violence. Conrad says he was struck by Home Secretary Sir William Harcourt’s comment that Scotland Yard seemed determined to keep him “in the dark” about the Fenian affairs they were constantly investigating (xxxvii).14

Stark differences in tone and detail, though, make Conrad’s vision darker, and his world more vicious, than James’s. The ethos, the life-world, of the anarchists in James’s novel is more vital than Conrad’s, and the other side of society—the aristocracy to which Hyacinth aspires—exists in a rarefied world of high culture with essentially decent
people who are being disappointed and betrayed all around. James was willing to concede that the impoverished peoples of London had legitimate grievances, and showed convincingly the temptation to turn to radical activism out of a sense of camaraderie, and to gain a sense of agency—even if such commitment may ultimately lead to disaster. James gives his radicalism an ethos, a firm social base, a life-world of its own. Conrad, by contrast, saw nothing honorable or reasonable about radical activities or in the governing classes that were incompetent in understanding the festering discontent all around them. His radicals are desperate people from all walks of life, some poor, some middle-class, and some aristocratic. All are hypocrites, though, and none of them act in accord with their convictions, nor do they have coherent convictions to begin with. Despite its acerbity, Conrad’s political critique runs deeper than James’s, though, precisely through Conrad’s evocation of the actual violence, the actual death and destruction, and the collateral emotional devastation, that terrorist attacks unleash. A significant difference between these two works, though, which imbues The Secret Agent with an emotional valence that The Princess Casamassima lacks altogether, is the graphic depiction of violence—of the actual carnage, and its emotional impact upon the characters affected—in Conrad’s novel.

James presents the final catastrophe of Hyacinth’s suicide on the novel’s final page:

Hyacinth lay there as if he were asleep, but there was a horrible thing, a mess of blood, on the bed, in his side, in his heart. His arm hung limp beside him, downwards, off the narrow couch; his face was white and his eyes were closed. So much Schinkel saw, but only for an instant; a convulsive movement of the Princess, bending over the body while a strange low cry came from her lips, covered it up….The Princess got up, hearing another person in the room, and then Schinkel perceived the small revolver lying just under the bed. He picked it up carefully and placed it on the mantel-shelf, keeping, equally carefully, to himself
the reflection that it would certainly have served much better for the Duke.” (590-91)

When the princess bursts into the bedroom, Hyacinth’s corpse appears restfully reposed, with nothing suggesting a violent end except for the “mess of blood,” the “horrible thing” on the bed. The only suggestion of physical damage out of the ordinary is the mention of the blood being “in his side” and, curiously, “in his heart.” James’s conveyance of the emotional reaction from the princess is delicate and restrained, as she omits only a “strange low cry.” The anguish is obvious, but James leaves the princess, and ends his novel, in the moment of discovery, presumably in the very moment before the princess’s emotional devastation would burst forth. James leaves this assumption for the sensitive reader to make, though. The reader is left to apprehend the final catastrophe without narrative denouement, and most importantly to supply the anguish that James only hints at. The princess’s reaction is ironically countered by the cynicism of the anarchist Schinkel, who merely, irritably wishes things would have gone according to plan. Schinkel’s politicized commentary is the final, ironic word on the drama as James closes the curtains on the scene, with the princess still prostrate over the bed. We can imagine the tears that will come later, but James leaves the details of the emotional and physical devastation almost mercifully undrawn.

Conrad, on the other hand, spares us nothing. In the following scene, Chief Inspector Heat is viewing the physical remains of Stevie, the boy who had accidentally blown himself up with the bomb he was supposed to plant at the observatory, in the police morgue:

The shattering violence of destruction which had made of that body a heap of nameless fragments affected his feelings with a sense of ruthless cruelty, though his reason told him the effect must have been as swift as flash of lightning. The
man, whoever he was, had died instantaneously; and yet it seemed impossible to believe that a human body could have reached that state of disintegration without passing through the pangs of inconceivable agony. (73)

All that the Chief Inspector is faced with are the aftereffects of the bombing, and the state of the unidentifiable mess of flesh and tissue that once was Stevie causes Heat to struggle to understand the force of the blast that had “made of that body a heap of nameless fragments.” Moreover, Heat is compelled to imagine the physical pain that Stevie must have experienced in the moment of his violent death, and is deeply disturbed by the idea that Stevie may have felt the full “pangs of inconceivable agony” of his body being ripped apart as if the moment were an eternity, even though Heat’s reason tells him it would have all transpired in a literal flash, instantaneously. Though Conrad does not incorporate the actual bombing into the direct flow of narrative events, he presents the scene of the explosion in graphic detail not once but twice in the novel, as imaginatively, feelingly recreated in the minds of the chief inspector and Winnie Verloc, Stevie’s sister.

Conrad does not spare the gruesome details, as he completes the picture: “after a rainlike fall of mangled limbs the decapitated head of Stevie lingered suspended alone, and faded out slowly like the last star of a pyrotechnic display” (213). Such a display of the image of Stevie’s decapitated head may come across as melodramatic. Yet he does not spare the more base sensual images of the carnage, as Winnie’s horror is left to simmer with the notion that the park-groundsman had to clean up Stevie’s remains with a shovel. Where James merely hints at the devastation, painting an intimate picture of pregnant desolation in his novel’s final moment, Conrad explores the devastation in its social, political, and emotional resonance among multiple segments of society. The
violent act was the necessary moment of narrative conclusion for James, but was the shimmering, horrific center of the narrative (to borrow Hinton’ phrasing) for Conrad.

The emotional impact of the radical activities, and the attempts to police them, are drawn out even further in Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*, which I discuss in Chapter 1. Indeed, this is the crucial critical move that all of the novelists discussed herein make in their novels of political violence—they all use the violent act, and the phobic objectivity of such acts, recursively, showing the multiple valences of such acts upon multiple audiences. For some, the act stuns, captivates, or devastates. For others, the act bores or repels. Conrad is attuned to the power of the phobic object of violence, and its sensational and sentimental social dimensions. Though terrorist violence is used in the public realm to produce political response and compel political action, this violence can also be dismissed, the message twisted or attenuated, and made to serve a myriad of other objectives. The emotional impact upon the people actually affected, both the victims and the killers, is undeniable. And that is exactly what the novelists I address herein do compellingly: they reveal the deeper underlying emotional stakes of political violence upon the subjects affected.

4. Conclusion

The twentieth-century novels that I critique herein all ask questions about what we know about terrorism, and politicized violence in general. More importantly, all of the novels deconstruct why we think we know what we do about terrorism. The character studies they provide model ourselves—citizens of liberal societies that are beset by the mania of terrorism and the reaction to it—in our incapacities to understand the political complexities of the situation as a whole, and the tendency to play the very theatrical
roles—getting caught up in the melodrama—in which the terrorists and the embattled regime would cast us. This very tendency to use the big “we” here that I’m resorting to is indicative of the problem of critique herein. Envisioning “we” as readers, liberal subjects, all of a piece, with shared identities, goals, and agendas is exactly part of the simplifying operations of terrorism discourse. These novels complicate this simplifying discourse, showing the ideological compromises that need to be made—that are made readily and unthinkingly, or painfully and conflictedly—in embracing a politically informed view of the public phenomena enveloping terrorism.

In the chapters that follow, I examine a set of writers, as novelists but also as political and social commentators, in the public discourse that they have contributed to, in shaping the conversation about incidents of political violence in different time periods throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. I am re-examining these authors in regards to the political critique of terrorism they provide in their fiction precisely through their attention to the phenomena of terrorism’s spectacularity and theatricality. As far back as Conrad, all of these authors were uniquely attuned to the function of these performative dynamics of violence, and all wrote about and lived with instances of terroristic violence in their own times and societies. Each chapter deals with a different time period in the twentieth century, the century of total war, in which terrorist violence was rife. Terrorism’s spectacularity and theatricality are transhistorical, though the particular instances of the violence are unique to their historical coordinates. All of these authors were attuned to these operative dynamics of terrorism, and critiqued the violence and the violent rhetoric that spurred it in public discourse, in their fiction. More importantly, though, all of these authors conspicuously revealed the emotional dynamics
associated with the acts as experienced by the victims and the killers themselves through foregrounding these visceral experiences in their narratives. In these novels, terrorism and the regime’s retaliatory violence against it can no longer be only apprehended through public, politicized discourse. The emotional experiences of the sufferers complicate and destabilize the political discourse upon public violence. If only in the realm of fiction alone, this eruption of emotion serves as a political challenge to the discourses upon terrorism, in a way that resists political coordinates.

In Chapter 1, “‘The Spirit of Revolution’ and ‘The Phrases of Sham Sentiment’: Melodrama and Irony in Conrad’s Novels of Terrorism,” I examine Joseph Conrad’s terrorism novels, The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes, in depth. In these two novels, Conrad takes political discourse—both revolutionary and reactionary—and critiques both rhetorics in light of political melodrama. Taking Peter Brooks’s theory in The Melodramatic Imagination of melodrama functioning as an eruption into modern discourse of the “moral occult,” in the form of Manichean rhetoric about cosmic battles of good and evil being waged on the political field, I claim that Conrad’s literary irony was uniquely attuned to exposing the sentimental power of melodrama as the work of political machinations, and to reveal the true sentimental stakes of political scheming upon its victims. In his apprehension of the functions of political melodrama, Conrad is a preeminently “modern” author, and the first twentieth-century novelist-critic of terrorism. His fictive interrogations of the melodramas of political violence are the basis of those that continued throughout the twentieth century, which I explore in the chapters that follow. Conrad’s irony demonstrates the bind between revolutionary and reactionary politics, and reveals the extent to which both are implicated in the same system of power.
Conrad’s irony also illuminates the fluctuating powers of sentiment. Where Mr. X in Conrad’s short story “The Informer” claims that revolutionary rhetoric has “no sham meaning,” Conrad reveals all such rhetoric for its specious power to persuade sentimentally. However, Conrad also shows the emotional and familial toll that revolutionary activity takes upon the actual lives affected, compelling readers to question the sincerity of the political commitments of the characters, as well as their own.

The incipient twentieth-century ideologies that Conrad critiqued became full-fledged nationalistic forces in the 1930s, the decade of worldwide ideological furor. In Chapter 2, “The Necessary Murder: Ideology and Moral Conflict in the Spanish Civil War,” I examine Hemingway’s writings of the Spanish Civil War in which he critiques the left-wing ideological fervor that drew fighters to the front. Hemingway is unique among modernist writers in that he engaged with the Spanish Civil War directly but ambivalently in his fiction. Hemingway was anti-Fascist, rather than pro-Communist, as were many writers who supported the Spanish Republic at the time. This lack of positive political program, plus his privileged access to the Spanish Republican war directorship, enabled Hemingway to critique the ideological commitment that drives people to fight in a war waged by a foreign army abroad. Hemingway’s writing on the war stands in stark contrast with the ideological propaganda produced by numerous other American and European literary figures that supported the Spanish Republicans unequivocally. Where scores of other writers melodramatically rendered the civil war as a cosmic battle against terroristic Fascism, Hemingway critiques the necessary moral and emotional equivocations to be made when one kills for an ideological cause. For Whom the Bell Tolls stands out among all novels of the Spanish Civil War in taking the most complete
and circumspect view to the whole dramatic tragedy of the war, which most of the authors who voiced their support for the Republic and hatred of Fascism were not able to do. If the Fascists were terroristic in their killing of civilians, Hemingway graphically showed how the Republicans were guilty of the very same atrocities. This was not the same Manichean battle of good against evil that everyone claimed in the propaganda, after all. In this light, the leftist ideologue becomes terroristic himself, willing to kill and die, unquestioningly, for a cause.

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* serves as a critical study of the mentality of a figure such as Hemingway himself, who in the spirit of the times is led to risk his life and kill for a cause he knows actually little about. It allows Hemingway to question the motives, evasions, and moral rationalizations that such a figure must constantly make in order to stay true to his mission. The text combines the modernist rejection of programmatic political commitment with actual, *willing* ideological engagement. Hemingway’s politics of style, which, as Suzanne Clark observes, amounts to the control that Hemingway exerts over the expression of sentiment in his narration of the novel, allows him to interrogate these commitments in fiction. Sentiment in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—both when it is expressed and when it is conspicuously blocked—are what defy reductionist readings of the book as merely “political,” just as Hemingway’s sentiment defies reductionist readings of him as merely the archetypal stoic, masculinist author of the modernist stamp.

In Chapter 3, “Severed Heads and Power Lines: Postcolonial Violence in Modernist and Postmodernist Fiction,” I examine two postcolonial writers: V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, who explore the nature of terrorism in postcolonial societies from
the Cold War into the twenty-first century. These writers’ respective modernist and postmodernist techniques present postcolonial violence in very different emotional registers. Where modernist fiction foregrounds the self as the site of violence and pain, and draws upon the intensity of this experience as crucial to the narrative, postmodern fiction is concerned with the causes and consequences of the violent act, but does not make the act itself the focus of the narrative. Postmodern fiction, then, compels its readers to ascribe their own meanings to the suffering after examining it from various social and political angles.

Naipaul (through his modernist technique of psychological realism, mixed with social realism) shows the perspective of the victim of postcolonial dispossession by showing the full socioeconomic misery in detail, and implicates Western-liberal readers without soliciting sympathy for the victim. By contrast, Rushdie presents the world-historical situation that surround the conflicts of his characters in the postmodern vein, in full panoramic, multimedia scope. In doing so, Rushdie does not portray his characters’ actions in the visceral way that modernism does with its focus on the subject (as does Naipaul). Naipaul attempts to terrify readers through the intensity of the violent act itself. We’re caught up in the moment, and in the thoughts and emotions of the characters themselves. The postmodernist author Rushdie attempts to compel readers to examine and reflect upon the violence, and goes to great lengths to present all of the historical and personal factors that enmesh the act. In their roles as novelists, then, Naipaul is an activist who seeks to terrorize his readers and grate against their sympathies, while Rushdie is an analyst who strives to make his readers gain a deeper understanding of the causes of
violence and their place in the global network, making the violence less frightening and more familiar.

In Chapter 4, “The Curious Knot: Cyber-Capital, Terrorism, and Art’s Third Way in DeLillo’s Millennial Novels,” I take up the controversial and provocative claim that both writers and terrorists are “remnants of a romantic belief in the power of marginalized persons to transform history,” as Margaret Scanlan claimed of novelists’ anxieties about the waning power of art to affect cultural change in the late twentieth century. In Don DeLillo’s novels of terrorism—*Mao II* and *Falling Man*—he explores the theoretical similarities between art and terrorism, questioning the novelist’s ability to terrorize readers in the same way that terrorism does the public at large. DeLillo explores postmodern performance art as the action-wing of art, which thrives on the conveyance of a shocking, visually captivating, yet ephemeral and potentially alienating spectacle, as the only means of achieving the visceral impact that terrorism could. Yet, DeLillo retains his belief that the novel is ultimately a more effective means of exploring and analyzing the intricacies and nuances of a situation, rather than art that impacts through shock, just as terrorism does on an emotional level.

The shock of the spectacle overwhelms all, and ultimately distances the viewer from the message at hand. DeLillo critiques the power of the spectacle to relieve its audience of the need to think and reflect. Therefore, the novel ends up supplying the critique and guiding its audience’s interpretations in ways that performance art cannot. For DeLillo, the truly lasting artistic statements are those that compel their audience to think deeply and reflect—this is art’s only way to make a political statement in the world of cyber-capital. The virtue of the novel, then, for DeLillo, is to provide an imaginative space, a forum in which artists and terrorists *can*
indeed compete on the level of ideas. Perhaps this is the only possibility for the novel to function as a subversive force in the political world, and for the novelist to serve as political activist.

In the Conclusion, “Islamists, Hijackers, and the Problems of Representation: Terrorist Subjectivities in Post-9/11 Fiction,” then, I examine the representational difficulties of portraying the terrorist subject in post-9/11 fiction. I discuss three contrasting fictive representations of subjects who either actively turn to terrorism—Martin Amis’s “The Last Days of Mohammed Atta” and DeLillo’s *Falling Man*—or who embrace the possibility of doing so, as in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and claim that novels that have political impact that transcends politicized attempts to demonize Al Qaeda and their sympathizers must directly implicate the reader as an agent in the same neoliberal geopolitical system that enmeshes those who resort to terrorism as well. This is terrorism fiction at its most politically radical.
CHAPTER 1

“The Spirit of Revolution” and “The Phrases of Sham Sentiment”:
Melodrama and Irony in Conrad’s Novels of Terrorism

One evening he remarked, casually, in the course of conversation, “There’s no amendment to be got out of mankind except by terror and violence.”

You can imagine the effect of such a phrase out of such a man’s mouth upon a person like myself, whose whole scheme of life had been based upon a suave and delicate discrimination of social and artistic values. Just imagine! Upon me, to whom all sorts and forms of violence appeared as unreal as the giants, ogres, and seven-headed hydrias whose activities affect, fantastically, the course of legends and fairy-tales! I suppose I am impressionable and imaginative. I had a disturbing vision of darkness, full of lean jaws and wild eyes, amongst the hundred electric lights of the place. But somehow this vision made me angry, too. The sight of that man, so calm, breaking bits of white bread, exasperated me. (77)


*****

You perceive the force of a word. He who wants to persuade should put his trust not in the right argument, but in the right word. The power of sound has always been greater than the power of sense. I don’t say this by way of disparagement. It is better for mankind to be impressionable than reflective. Nothing humanely great—great, I mean, as affecting a whole mass of lives—has come from reflection. On the other hand, you cannot fail to see the power of mere words; such words as Glory, for instance, or Pity. I won’t mention any more. They are not far to seek. Shouted with perseverance, with ardor, with conviction, these two by their sound alone have set whole nations in motion and upheaved the dry, hard ground on which rests our whole social fabric. There’s “virtue” for you if you like! . . .

Of course the accent must be attended to. The right accent. That’s very important. The capacious lung, the thundering or tender vocal chords. Don’t talk to me of your Archimedes’ lever. He was an absent-minded person with a mathematical imagination. Mathematics commands all my respect, but I have no use for engines. Give me the right word and the right accent and I will move the world. (1-2)

–Joseph Conrad, “A Familiar Preface” to A Personal Record, 1912

In Joseph Conrad’s short story “The Informer: An Ironic Tale,” the mysterious anarchist Mr. X captivates the narrator over dinner in a fine restaurant with a tale of the police infiltration of an anarchist cell, and a young bourgeois woman’s fervent sympathy for her anarchist collaborators. Mr. X shocks the narrator into attention by “casually” remarking over the course of dinner that “terror and violence” are the only means to “amend” society. For the narrator, the calm utterance of these words instantly conjures up nightmare visions of anarchist mayhem in the dark corners of society, the “lean jaws” and “wild eyes” of the “anarchist” who previously had no more purchase on the narrator’s
mind than did the monsters of fairy-tales. Almost as soon, however, the narrator’s annoyance at such a preposterous-seeming claim gets the better of him. After all, here is a notorious anarchist (“whose flaming red revolutionary pamphlets” “used to overwhelm the powers of every Continental police like a plague of crimson gadflies” [74]) who collects expensive china, dresses in his finest evening wear, and sups in a fancy restaurant. How can he claim to want to destroy the very bourgeois goods he is enjoying? The narrator’s ironic awareness of the situation soon divests Mr. X’s violent anarchist melodrama of its power to frighten him.

Any consolation the narrator might gain from thinking Mr. X is a charlatan is quickly swept away, however, when Mr. X uses such situational irony to demonstrate the bourgeoisie’s complicity, even perverse approval, of anarchy. Mr. X insists that the narrator would be very surprised to learn of the extent of the bourgeois sympathy, particularly among women, for the romantic anarchists. Much to the narrator’s disturbance, Mr. X enlightens him: “Don’t you know yet…that an idle and selfish class loves to see mischief being made, even if it is made at its own expense? Its own life being all a matter of pose and gesture, it is unable to realize the power and the danger of a real movement and of words that have no sham meaning” (78). Mr. X then blithely tells him that bourgeois sympathies for the revolutionists are all a matter of “fun and sentiment,” this allure of anarchy being yet another outlet for “mischief to be made” for the entertainment of the bourgeoisie (78). He warns that this superficial “fun and sentiment” has its political consequences, though, to the detriment of the “idle and selfish class.” Mr. X tells him that “[e]ven in England, where you have some common-sense, a demagogue has only to shout loud enough and long enough to find some backing in the very class he
is shouting at” (78). Revolutionary rhetoric, apparently, has “no sham meaning,” and this is sufficient to sate bourgeois thirst for “fun and sentiment” in an otherwise sterile life.

Conrad takes up this inquiry into the power of words further in “A Familiar Preface” to his *A Personal Record*, a late-career reflection upon his life as a writer. In his preface, Conrad appraises the power of the right word spoken in the right manner, the right “accent,” as having the power to move the masses. Conrad seems facetious in his praising the power of the “right word” while spurning the powers of “reflection.” After all, how could an author whose writing is so steeped in irony, who offers complex, nuanced accounts of contemporary social and political institutions, dismiss the need for reflection? Conrad’s praise of rhetoric is mixed with scorn, and his take on the “virtue” of the words “Glory” and “Pity” to move nations is steeped in sarcasm. At the end of this piece, “resignation” is the antidote Conrad offers for the temptations of sentiment, which is “not mystic, not detached,” but “open-eyed, conscious, and informed by love” as “the only one of our feelings for which it is impossible to become a sham” (13).

Conrad’s invocation of “the right word,” though, recalls Mr. X’s appraisal of “words that have no sham meaning” that are sufficient to win bourgeois sympathies. These “right words” are, presumably, words that come across in earnest, which are intended to resist or defy irony, which are not found in the bourgeois lifestyle that Mr. X says is entirely signified by “pose and gesture.” However, Conrad’s prescription that “the right word” must be supplemented by “the right accent” shows that the execution of these “right words” is all a matter of pose and gesture as well. After all, Conrad defines “the right accent” as a matter of rhetorical delivery: the word is accentuated by “the capacious lung” and “the thundering or tender vocal chords.” These rhetorical gestures apparently
give the words the appearance of earnestness; in their ability to play on listeners’ sentiments, they merely appear to have “no sham meaning.” Thus, revolutionary gestures are thus revealed to be no different than the empty social gestures of bourgeois society. Hence, as Mr. X says, “it is all fun and sentiment,” and this is the ironic joke he plays on the narrator at the story’s conclusion: the revelation that the ruling class and the revolutionaries all run with the same crowd. The revolutionaries need the patronage and sympathy of the bourgeoisie to do their work, and the bourgeoisie needs the sensational menace and the romantic allure of the revolutionaries to give it a sense of purpose. This is the lesson that Conrad would explore in much greater detail in the novel that immediately followed “The Informer,” The Secret Agent, in which he reveals that political radicalism, in most cases, is merely an affectation, and the bourgeoisie’s occasional dalliances with radicals are merely an amusement for salon society. This is the irony of revolutionary sentiment with its words that are ostensibly “without sham” for Conrad: revolution is always circumscribed within the extant system of power.

Revealingly, Conrad’s discussion of the power of words and accents comes in the midst of a seemingly candid discussion of both composition and politics in his “Familiar Preface.” In discussing his own writing, Conrad condemns writers who would call up excessive sentiment, claiming “There can be nothing more humiliating than to see the shaft of one’s emotion missing the mark of either laughter or tears. Nothing more humiliating! And this for the reason that should the mark be missed, should the open display of emotion fail to move, then it must perish unavoidably in disgust or contempt” (8-9). Conrad believes that the author’s fidelity to actual human desires and actions obligates him to present these things in all their complexity, without the sentimental
dimension being exaggerated so to manipulate an audience. Such manipulation, when exposed as such, only earns the author the contempt of his readers.

Conrad’s views on sentimentalism and revolution are closely linked in that both require the audience to forego its powers of reflection and surrender, unthinkingly, to the sentimental register of the words. At the end of the Preface, Conrad claims that the “revolutionary spirit is convenient in this, that it frees one from all scruples as regards ideas” (14).1 Significantly, Conrad suggests that it is the “spirit” of the revolution that is the operative factor, by which he seems to mean the pathos, the sentiment, which need not be explained or reflected upon. It is this revolutionary spirit which is tied to the power of rhetoric which drives men to action and moves nations. Conrad’s condemnation of sentiment is concerned mostly with the sentimental investment of revolutionary fervor. In discussing his political views in his 1912 Preface, Conrad prefigures his 1920 Author’s Notes to both *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* in his outright condemnation of revolutionaries therein.

Melodrama is the narrative form that all political violence takes. It is meant to send a clear, unequivocal message to a broad audience amidst a perplexing political situation. It portrays the actors as agents of absolute right and necessity in a revolutionary sense, or of absolute criminality and evil in a reactionary sense. Melodrama draws upon the sentiments of its audience, inspiring pity or fear and using such emotional responses to motivate the audience to perceive a certain truth, or pursue a certain course of action. This is precisely the nexus between excessive sentiment and revolutionary politics that Conrad interrogated in his works. At a time when the British press propagated public fears of the unforeseen and unprecedented menace that “anarchists” (a catch-all term used
to include both foreign and domestic socialists, anticolonial nationalists, as well as anarchists, of all sorts) posed for decent society, Conrad could not grant the anarchists this due. An 1885 pamphlet, written after a series of dynamite attacks by the United Irishmen had damaged London subways, claimed that “the modern dynamiter, the wholesale indiscriminate assassin, in comparison with whom the Thug was an embodiment of sweetness and light—this monstrosity, until it sprang into existence, was a creature that the ordinary mind was incapable even of imagining” (qtd. in Melchiori 30). Conrad, however, was not only wholly capable of imagining these “creatures,” but he refused to see the nature of this political violence as anything monstrous or diabolical. At a time when popular British novelists were writing novels that drew out the full melodrama of dynamite terrorism, Conrad’s novels of terrorism explored the phenomenon of political violence in much more complexity. Conrad was concerned with divesting the melodrama of political violence of its sentimental power to captivate, while he explored the sentimental stakes involved in the lives of the victims of such violence.

Conrad, who is widely considered to be one of the first great modern political novelists, and one of the earliest to incorporate terrorism in the novel as both a theme and a plot device, was preoccupied with the problems of sentiment inherent in political melodrama. Conrad’s “political novels” all deal with the problems of radical and reactionary politics of his day, as exhibited in a variety of different forms and venues. Terrorism is one form in which radical politics plays out in modern society, and the terrorist attack as a phenomenon, and the rationale for committing acts of terrorism, is crucial to the plot development and philosophical insight that Conrad offers in The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes in particular. Conrad was especially attuned to the
melodramatic form that all political narratives inevitably take in the objective world. For Conrad, both parties—radical and reactionary—employ melodramatic conventions to engage in a politically (if not morally) justified struggle against obstructive (if not evil) forces in efforts to forge consensus among their followers, to persuade doubters, and to win converts among the middle- and lower classes.

In his essays and fiction, Conrad drew conspicuous attention to the power of melodramatic rhetoric to persuade people, tapping into the sentiments of publics through words or acts committed by agents in the political sphere. Conrad critiqued sentiment in politics as disingenuous and dangerous, whether employed by radical or reactionary causes. Conrad remained skeptically noncommittal in his political loyalties overall, and both radicals and reactionaries drew his ire in his fiction and essays. In his novels, Conrad’s irony has often been credited with undermining the discourses of political and social institutions. The true power of Conrad’s irony, though, is to expose the sentimental power of melodrama as the work of political machinations, and to reveal the true sentimental stakes of political scheming upon its victims. This is what makes Conrad a preeminently “modern” author, and the first twentieth-century novelist-critic of terrorism. His fictive interrogations of the melodramas of political violence are the basis of those that continued throughout the twentieth century, which I explore in the following chapters. Conrad’s irony demonstrates the bind between revolutionary and reactionary politics, and reveals the extent to which both are implicated in the same system of power. Conrad’s irony also illuminates the fluctuating powers of sentiment. Despite Mr. X’s claim that revolutionary rhetoric has “no sham meaning,” Conrad reveals all such rhetoric for its specious power to persuade sentimentally. However, Conrad also shows the true
toll that revolutionary activity takes upon the actual lives affected, compelling readers to question the sincerity of the political commitments of the characters, as well as their own.

1. Melodrama and Irony

The quote from the 1885 British pamphlet, which calls the dynamiter a “monstrosity” that defies the imagination, is producing a sensational melodrama for mass public consumption. This “wholesale indiscriminate assassin,” beside whom the “Thug” (at this time referring to the assassin followers of the Indian Hindu cult) seems “an embodiment of sweetness and light” is being placed in a hierarchy of cosmological, as well as racialized, evil. The moral dimensions of the dynamiter’s acts of terrorism are the only things being considered here, and no attempt is made in the popular press to grasp the social and political motives of the United Irishmen who committed the dynamite attacks. Such is the simplifying moral logic of melodrama, which only serves to obscure the social and political content of the acts being melodramatized.

At all levels, any political discourse that legitimates violence must operate with the simplifying logic of melodrama as Peter Brooks explains it in The Melodramatic Imagination. Political melodrama involves the positing of absolutes in good and evil as in literary melodrama, while offering a political objective as the utmost good to be attained, and demonizing certain political subjects as enemies that must be vanquished. With regards to this demonization, Brooks says that “Melodramatic good and evil are highly personalized,” manifested in people “who indeed have no psychological complexity but who are strongly characterized” (16). Melodramatic schematizing, of course, is at odds with the way the world really works; yet, people must be made to fit these artificial roles
in which the melodrama would cast them. People must be treated as if they did, in fact, embody such metaphysical, transcendent values. Brooks defines melodrama as a clash of ethical orders. By the mid-nineteenth century, when the Western world was becoming increasingly secularized, with religion no longer dominant, there could no longer be any universally recognized higher-order values by which to appeal; there was only a matter of secular “right” and “wrong.” In the modern world, conflicting ethical orders must vie for control, though the melodramatist would render this clash of values a battle of cosmic forces. There can be no negotiating with evil; therefore, there can be no politically negotiated reconciliation between the parties in a melodrama: “The ritual of melodrama involves the confrontation of clearly identified antagonists and the expulsion of one of them” (17).

The melodramatic actor holds forth a resistant belief in the efficacy of the moral statement, which is anchored by the actor’s intention. Such a belief, in both fiction and in politics, operates on the assumption that the statement can be transmitted and received monologically and unequivocally, defying the infinite drift of meaning through the sea of competing interpretations. Melodrama would attempt to resist this problem of polysemy, or ignore it altogether, and comes across as an exasperated, even desperate attempt, to register one’s complaint, to make one’s case heard, even amidst a disavowing or ignorant audience. Melodrama is an inherently democratic act, and anyone can employ its techniques to advance one’s own political agenda. Indeed, melodrama’s bold and often unsubstantiated claims of moral certitude in the face of discursive ambiguity, nostalgically posit the possibility that a subject can make a monological statement of unequivocal meaning. Deconstruction be damned! In her study of filmic melodrama,
Christine Gledhill claims that melodrama acts *as if* such semiological resistance is possible, that melodrama expresses the desire to “force meaning and identity from the inadequacies of language” (33). Gledhill claims that melodrama would resist the indeterminacy upon meaning in the modern and postmodern world by operating “on the level not so much of ‘Yes, but…’ than of ‘So what!’” (33). At stake here, then, is what Ann Cvetkovich calls the fetishization of the sign, a willful belief in the sign’s ability to signify certain forms of social, political, and economic oppression in a viscerally compelling way (179). The symbols contained in any political melodrama—characters, events, and places embodying absolutes of right and wrong, good and evil—all perform the naturalization of the abstract concepts of myth that Roland Barthes deconstructs in his classic semiological study *Mythologies*. Barthes says that myth is “de-politicized speech” which gives a “natural and eternal justification” for the political concepts, the ideologemes in Bakhtinian terms, contained in the myth-making speech act (143).

Melodrama is a form of myth that would obscure its own political underpinnings, yet is used for overtly political purposes.

This brings us back to the issue of “words that have no sham meaning” that Conrad raises through Mr. X in “The Informers.” After all, melodrama is a stubborn resistance to polysemy, positing one intended meaning in the midst of infinite possible others. If melodrama acts *as if* its words, acts, or gestures are equivalent to their intended meaning, is it enough, then, as Mr. X claims is the case with revolutionary rhetoric, to claim these are not “shams,” being done entirely in deadly earnest? In other words, is radical and revolutionary melodramatic rhetoric more genuine, and less of a “sham,” than that of the English liberal bourgeoisie or the Russian czarist autocracy? Conrad obviously
doesn’t think so. In “The Informers,” Conrad leaves the matter of Mr. X’s true identity and motives hauntingly indeterminate, leaving open the possibility that his anarchist credentials and the truth of the story he tells are all a joke upon the narrator and the reader. Indeed, Conrad displays all throughout his works the fundamental problems with revolutionary idealism and revolutionary action. He shows how misguided the best and the most sincere of his revolutionaries are, and how depraved the worst and most hypocritical of them are. Crucially, though, Conrad believes that it is not the fault of the best and most misguided, however, for taking the course of action they do; it is the irreparably flawed condition of the society and the political system to which they belong that corrupts their humanitarian sympathies and drives them to disaster.

Most critics agree that Conrad’s political criticism, as shown throughout the entire body of his work, attacks the society in which political ideals are betrayed by the ulterior motives of the people in charge of carrying out these ideals. For Eloise Knapp Hay, this is a matter of man’s ideal self, and the possibility that he can live up to his utopian schemes for human betterment, which comes into inevitable conflict with his actual, imperfect, corrupt self—in which case utopian political schemes are at disastrous odds with actual human nature (16). Yet the desire for utopian schemes remains. The entire twentieth century can arguably be seen as the trial and failure of one utopian scheme after another, on a massive level. In the post-sacred world ushered in by the French Revolution, the terms of political conflict had changed irrevocably.

According to Peter Brooks, the French Revolution was the first of the West’s conflicts to be understood at the time on a purely ethical, rather than sacred, basis. The Revolution formed, in Brooks’s terms, “a new alternative basis for the ethical
community: a sentimental virtue…or else a retributive purgative terror” (18). As the Revolution showed, though, the modern state must constantly negotiate between these two options, and in the midst of revolution, there is nothing to safeguard against recourse to terror. This “sentimental virtue” would serve as the underpinning of any modern democratic republic: the virtues of justice, liberty, equality, fraternity, etc. Brooks claims that these opposing terms of “sentimental virtue” and “terror” make the French Revolution the first case of political melodrama writ large. The melodrama secularizes the transcendent values for the post-sacred world. Conrad perceived the problem of democracy as stemming from the failure of the French Revolution to uphold its principles. In *A Personal Record*, Conrad claimed that “the French Revolution…was not a political movement at all, but a great outburst of morality” (154-55). In its resulting five years of terror, Conrad claimed that this “outburst of morality” was sentimental in its nature. Such a broad-scale expression of morality was bankrupt in Conrad’s eyes, as he claimed in his preface that “I think that all ambitions are lawful except those which climb upward on the miseries or credulities of mankind” (12). For Conrad, any large-scale utopian scheme was guilty of just that.

The problem with democracy, as Conrad saw it play out in the French Revolution, was that it allowed for demagoguery that eventually gave way to tyranny, a betrayal of the revolution’s original democratic ideals. In his 1905 essay “Autocracy and War,” Conrad claimed that “the glorified French Revolution itself, except for its destructive force, was in essentials a mediocre phenomenon” (86). He claimed that “the parentage of that great social and political upheaval was intellectual, the idea was elevated; but it is the bitter fate of any idea to lose its royal form and power, to lose its “virtue” the moment it
descends from its solitary throne to work its will among the people” (ibid.). For Conrad, the disconnection between the Revolution’s exalted ideals and the corrupt nature of mankind was shown in Napoleon’s rise to power: “The degradation of the ideas of freedom and justice at the root of the French Revolution is made manifest in the person of its heir; a personality without law or faith” (ibid.). Thus, Napoleon, though bearing the virtuous symbol of the eagle, was actually the vulture that preyed upon a Europe in shambles.

Humanity, then, is caught in a vice: as in Hobbes’s wager, either we choose between totalitarian tyranny or baseless anarchy. In his “Author’s Note” to the 1920 edition of *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad applies this dilemma in stark terms to czarist Russia, in that “[t]he ferocity and imbecility of an autocratic rule rejecting all legality and in fact basing itself upon complete moral anarchism provokes the no less imbecile and atrocious answer of a purely Utopian revolutionism encompassing destruction by the first means to hand, in the strange conviction that a fundamental change of hearts must follow the downfall of any given human institutions” (xxi). Thus, in autocratic Russia, one had to embrace destruction and moral anarchy in one form or another.6

The novel’s protagonist, Razumov, however, is consumed by a longing for a third option: progressive reform instituted by some future visionary leader, using the current channels of autocracy. The novel’s narrator, the Doctor of Languages, judges that “The true Razumov had his being in the willed, in the determined future—in that future menaced by the lawlessness of autocracy—for autocracy knows no law—and the lawlessness of revolution” (58-59). In his moral dilemma over whether to aid the fugitive radical Haldin or report him to the police, Razumov comes to hate the radicals all the
more for ignorantly and impetuously taking upon themselves the revolution that is needed to reform the Russian autocracy: “What it needed was not the conflicting aspirations of a people, but a will strong and one: it wanted not the babble of many voices, but a man—strong and one! (27).” Razumov “believed…in the man who would come at the appointed time,” but he believes the uninformed radicals like Haldin, who cannot interpret the historical necessities that would bring forth a valid and lasting revolution, are ignorant in casting themselves in this messianic role. In a moment of self-conciliation before his betrayal of Haldin, Razumov, apparently channeling Hegel, sketches for himself the theses “History not Theory,” “Patriotism not Internationalism,” “Evolution not Revolution,” “Direction not Destruction,” and “Unity not Disruption” (50), in which he validates his disavowal of radical politics and his hope for some future salvation for the Russian people. Razumov must still make a choice in his present moment, though, in dealing with the one extreme—Haldin’s radicalism—that is set before him. He chooses the lesser of two evils—serving the autocracy by betraying the radical—with the self-righteous justification, “am I, who love my country…am I to have my future, perhaps my usefulness, ruined by this sanguinary fanatic?” (27). Despite his hope for some sort of liberal reform in Russia’s unforeseeable future, and his desire to take the middle ground and prepare for reform in his own scholarly way, Razumov must still choose between two reprehensible options. “I am being crushed—and I can’t even run away” (26), Razumov laments, and his choice of serving the autocracy determines the course of his actions, and seals his fate, for the rest of the novel.

Conrad’s political views can be seen as cynically realistic, as he pointed out the failure of idealism while exposing the political actors—the diplomats, reformers, and
revolutionaries—for their tainted motives and perversely entangled alliances with one another. In The Secret Agent, Conrad claimed that the revolutionaries who resort to terroristic violence are political neophytes, with an immature and foolish sense of political duty:

 Obviously one does not revolt against the advantages and opportunities of that state, but against the price which must be paid for the same in the coin of accepted morality, self-restraint, and toil. The majority of revolutionists are the enemies of discipline and fatigue mostly. There are natures too, to whose sense of justice the price exacted looms up monstrously enormous, odious, oppressive, worrying, humiliating, extortionaire, intolerable. Those are the fanatics. The remaining portion of social rebels is accounted for by vanity, the mother of all noble and vile illusions, the companion of poets, reformers, charlatans, prophets, and incendiaries (44).

Thus, all radicals are either lazy, unwilling to pay in self-restraint and toil the rights they would enjoy for themselves, or egomaniacally delusional. The first class he lists, the “fanatics,” undoubtedly includes the Professor in The Secret Agent. Among the second class, the “charlatans,” Conrad would seemingly include the disingenuous revolutionaries such as Karl Yundt, Michaelis, and Ossipon in The Secret Agent, and Peter Ivanovitch, Madame de S., and Nikita in Under Western Eyes.

Conrad portrays revolutionaries of the second order, the vain and deluded, most acerbically. These are the true shams, which he caricatures to the point of grotesquery in both The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes. In Under Western Eyes, Razumov experiences “a slight feeling of nausea” when he confronts the spinsterly, aristocratic Madame de S., “like a galvanized corpse out of some Hoffman’s Tale,” an “ancient, painted mummy with unfathomable eyes” (162). Particularly grotesque for Razumov is the relationship between Madame de S. and the burly, black-coated, masculine Peter Ivanovitch. This “super-revolutionist” celebrity is the author of a best-selling memoir in
which, after all his travails in the Russian prison system and survival as a fugitive in Siberia, he comes to promote a feminist revolutionary creed for the world. Razumov rationalizes that Ivanovitch’s partnering with Madame de S. is due entirely for her financial support: “She has millions!” (ibid.). So much for a hyper-masculine and feminist revolutionist. The notorious terrorist assassin Nikita is described as a “creature” “so grotesque as to set town dogs barking at its mere sight” (198). Nikita, whom Conrad calls “the perfect flower of the terroristic wilderness,” turns out to be a czarist double-agent more troubling for Conrad in his “banality” than in his “monstrosity,” since such a turn could readily be disclosed in the more lurid newspaper articles and “sensational novels” of the time (xxi). These terrorists of Conrad’s bore even him.

Conrad takes specific aim at the rhetoricians of revolution, those who would exhort their followers to action but who are powerless to act upon their own pronouncements. The most unsavory character in The Secret Agent is Karl Yundt, an aged, creaky, “all but moribund veteran of the dynamite wars” (40), who can only croak platitudes about violent class warfare, despite the fact that he had “never in his life raised personally as much as his little finger against the social edifice” (ibid.). Yundt was “no man of action; he was not even an orator of torrential eloquence, sweeping the masses along in the rushing noise and foam of a great enthusiasm” (ibid.). Yundt’s power to persuade is enabled only by his keen psychological exploitation of human weakness: “With a more subtle intention, he took the part of an insolent and venomous evoker of sinister impulses which lurk in the blind envy and exasperated vanity of ignorance, in the suffering and misery of poverty, in all the hopeful and noble illustrations of righteous anger, pity, and revolt” (ibid.). In an impromptu rant in the Verlocs’ home, Yundt gives a
specimen of his gory melodrama: “Do you know how I would call the nature of the present economic conditions? I would call it cannibalistic. That’s what it is! They are nourishing their greed on the quivering flesh and the warm blood of the people—nothing else” (42). Stevie, a “simple-minded” “half-wit” who overhears the rant, is the only one who takes Yundt at his word: “Stevie swallowed the terrifying statement with an audible gulp, and at once, as though it had been swift poison, sank limply in a sitting posture on the steps of the kitchen door” (ibid.). Stevie is the register for the intended affect of Yundt’s violent rhetoric, but he is the only one in the entire story who viscerally apprehends the melodramatic rhetoric of the anarchists. Winnie Verloc, Stevie’s sister, says that Stevie “gets into passions” over such talk because “he believes it’s all true” (49). As Yundt’s only audience, Stevie serves dual purposes for Conrad here. On the one hand, it may be only the “half-wits” like Stevie who “believe” Yundt’s rhetoric “[i]s all true.” One the other hand, Stevie may be seen to represent any portion of society who would believe that such revolutionary rhetoric is indeed genuine, or see the threat that it contains when delivered by an orator as inept as Yundt. In that sense, England may be a nation of half-wits to some extent.

The most pathetic of the melodramatists in The Secret Agent is Michaelis, a feeble-minded ex-convict grown obese from his seventeen years in prison, who spouts ideas which “formed in all their contradictions and obscurities an invincible and humanitarian creed, which he confessed rather than preached, with an obstinate gentleness, a smile of pacific assurance on his lips, and his candid blue eyes cast down because the sight of faces troubled his inspiration developed in solitude” (88-89). Michaelis is lost in his utopian visions, just as he is shut off from any practical human
interaction. He has the power to humor only the very few who are impressionable and patient enough to listen to him, and he is the most harmless and pitiful of the group. Michaelis is “no good in discussion, not because any amount of argument could shake his faith, but because the mere fact of hearing another voice disconcerted him painfully, confusing his thoughts at once—these thoughts that for so many years, in a mental solitude more barren than a waterless desert, no living voice had ever combated, commented, or approved” (37). The most optimistic utopian views among Verloc’s party are put forth from this particular anarchist who is the least able to garner support, whom the Assistant Commissioner of police regards as “a humanitarian sentimentalist, a little mad, but upon the whole incapable of hurting a fly intentionally” (91). After leaving the meeting at the Verlocs’ house, the only time in the story when all of the anarchists are gathered together, Yundt and Michaelis help each other outside, an obese man being guided by a decrepit one. Neither of them is a threat in any sense, and these caricatures illustrate the imbecility of the anarchists acerbically.

Of the first species of revolutionary, the fanatic guided by vile illusions of vanity, Conrad gives as straightforward a specimen as possible with the Professor in The Secret Agent. The Professor is a former science instructor who is denied tenure, and he monomaniacally turns his rage at his former institution’s failure to reward his brilliance toward the rest of society. Conrad’s narrator observes that the Professor’s “struggles, his privations, his hard work to raise himself in the social scale, had filled him with such an exalted conviction of his merits that it was extremely difficult for the world to treat him with justice—the standard of that notion depending so much upon the patience of the individual” (62). The Professor is thus a fanatic of a purely personal cause, to sate his
desire for vengeance with an impossible objective. The Professor’s own “indignation found in itself a final cause that absolved him from the sin of turning to destruction as the agent of his ambition” (68). Thus, the Professor becomes a “moral agent” without a political agenda, and he lives solely to promote his own personal agenda of destroying the English political institutions and unleashing chaos throughout society. Thus, in the spirit of violent anarchism, the Professor gives away the explosives he makes to everyone who requests them, regardless of their politics. Curiously, of all his anarchists, Conrad by his own admission had the most respect for the Professor, as he claimed that “I did not intend to make him despicable. He is incorruptible at any rate….At the worst he is a megalomaniac of an extreme type. And every extremist is respectable” (qtd. in Berthoud 101).  

Conrad seems to grant his respect to the fanatic, however misanthropic and destructive his ideas may be, because at least the fanatic has the courage and conviction to devote his life to a cause, unlike the hypocrites and shams like Yundt and Ivanovitch, who could exhort a crowd but who never had the courage to “lift a finger against the social edifice.”

It is in this sense that Conrad chastised the “revolutionary spirit” for “freeing one from all scruples as regards ideas” in his “Familiar Preface” to *A Personal Record*. In this work, Conrad claimed that the French Revolution was based purely on morality rather than political ideals, and that its lack of scruples enabled it to degenerate into mob violence. In his “Autocracy and War” essay, Conrad claimed that the Revolution was borne of an “elevated idea” which was later hijacked by a despotic dictator who betrayed the idea. In either case, it is the demagogues who run away with the revolutionary spirit. These are the vultures that prey upon the “miseries and credulities of mankind.” Conrad’s
claim in this essay that the French Revolution was a “mediocre phenomenon” is borne out in his studied condemnation of revolution in *Under Western Eyes*.\textsuperscript{11} The novel’s narrator, the Doctor of Languages who observes the entire train of events with willful, scholarly detachment, claims that “violent revolution falls into the hands of narrow-minded fanatics and of tyrannical hypocrites at first. Afterwards comes the turn of all the pretentious intellectual failures of the time. Such are the chiefs and the leaders” (101). To borrow from Yeats, the worst are the ones filled with passionate intensity in a revolution. It is the best, according to the Doctor, “[t]he scrupulous and the just, the noble, humane, and devoted natures; the unselfish and the intelligent” who “may begin a movement—but it passes away from them” (101). The Doctor claims that these originators of the revolutionary ideals, the ones with the most genuine motives, “are not the leaders of a revolution. They are its victims: the victims of disgust, of disenchantment—often of remorse” (101). These are the first to fall prey to the vultures, to those who hang on to the revolutionary promise only to advance their own agendas. “Hopes grotesquely betrayed, ideals caricatured—that is the definition of revolutionary success. There have been in every revolution hearts broken by such successes.” The genuine revolutionist, well-meaning though he may be, is doomed to betrayal and failure.\textsuperscript{12}

How can there be well-meaning, genuine revolutionists, “unselfish and intelligent” at all, then, when Conrad so unflatteringly catalogued revolutionists in *The Secret Agent* as either lazy or vain? Is this a new species that has escaped his earlier generalizations? In examining the two categories of revolutionaries, both the lazy hypocrites and the vain fanatics make easy fodder for caricature and satire. This is by and large exactly what Conrad does to both species of anarchist in *The Secret Agent*—Adolf Verloc, Michaelis,
and Yundt on the one hand, and the Professor on the other. Among Conrad’s critics, Irving Howe questions what he sees as Conrad’s pervasive use of satire in this novel; if Conrad’s anarchists are little more than comic buffoons with no inner lives, with all of their faults enlarged, then why does he seem so fascinated by the topic, and why should they trouble him at all? (99-100). Howe’s critique focuses only on the satire, and doesn’t account for the inconsistency in which Conrad renders his revolutionaries throughout his works. While some of the anarchists in *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* are little more than caricatures (“apes of a sinister jungle and…treated as their grimaces deserve” as he calls Peter Ivanovitch and Madame de S. in the 1920 “Author’s Note” to the novel [xx]), some of the other revolutionaries come close to being fully drawn humans with genuine passions. It would seem that the mold of the revolutionary, for Conrad, is a little more complicated than he seems to let on in his editorializing in *The Secret Agent*.

Victor Haldin, for one, certainly does not fit the model of the lazy amateur or the vain fanatic, though he can be seen as fanatical in his anti-czarist convictions. Haldin is convinced of the injustice of the czarist autocracy, and proclaims that direct action is needed to disrupt the system and inspire the downtrodden to revolt. He claims he is ready to sacrifice his life for his cause, serving as a martyr figure for those who would take up the struggle. Haldin says to his betrayer Razumov, “[y]ou suppose that I am a terrorist, now—a destructor of what is. But consider that the true destroyers are they who destroy the spirit of progress and truth, not the avengers who merely kill the bodies of the persecutors of human dignity” (16-17). If this desire for martyrdom be vanity, it is of a kind meant to aid his fellow comrades and thousands of would-be followers in the
indeterminate future. Haldin, in his monological state, would certainly intend his words to have no “sham meaning.”

However, Razumov, steeped in the desire for law and order, believes that every word Haldin says is a sham. Razumov must believe that Haldin is nothing more than a fanatic: “‘The fellow’s mad,’ he thought firmly, but this opinion did not mollify him towards Haldin” when Haldin proclaims his readiness for martyrdom (45). The narrator continues: “It was a perfectly impudent form of lunacy—and when it got loose in the sphere of public life of a country, it was obviously the duty of every good citizen….This train of thought broke off short there and was succeeded by a paroxysm of silent hatred towards Haldin, so intense that Razumov hastened to speak at random” (45). Razumov’s thoughts and sentiments are saturated by the dominant discourse of Russian autocracy. His hatred towards this vainglorious revolutionary who seeks him out for shelter after killing a czarist minister is visceral. Razumov simply must believe that Haldin is a fanatic, though an objective observer—certainly the Doctor of Languages who hears the case of Haldin’s sister—can recognize to some degree the validity of Haldin’s position. Haldin might be a fanatic, but it is for a political purpose that could very well be deemed valid. In condemning the Russian autocracy as the most heinous form of tyranny, Conrad grants Haldin at least that much dignity in his justifiable rebellion against it.

Haldin’s act of terrorism, and his entreaty to Razumov for aid and sympathy, are melodramatic in the extreme. What Howe claims is missing from The Secret Agent—any semblance of passionate conviction from the anarchists—comes through in white-hot fury from Haldin. What Conrad tries to do here, though, is relativize the passion, filtering it through others’ subject positions. Haldin’s melodrama is dispelled of its pathos first in
Razumov’s mind and then through the Doctor’s and Nathalia’s subsequent discourses upon revolution. Razumov protests to a czarist agent that he “hated” Haldin, that “[v]isionaries work everlasting evil on earth. Their Utopias inspire in the mass of mediocre minds a disgust of reality and a contempt for the secular logic of human development” (71), an impassioned outburst which foretells Conrad’s much more glib claim in *A Personal Record* that the revolutionary spirit frees one from “all scruples as regards ideas.”

Razumov, however, is hardly offering a disinterested assessment of revolutionism. His motives for betraying Haldin, as he confesses to Haldin’s sister Nathalia, are selfish in themselves. Razumov tries desperately to appeal to Nathalia for sympathy, urging her to feel the way he would feel if presented with such an impossible dilemma: “this man who had robbed me of my hardworking, purposeful existence. I, too, had my guiding idea” (265). Razumov’s denunciation of revolution, and his actions to uphold police law, are hardly done out of a good citizen’s patriotic duty. Razumov was concerned with protecting his own academic career and future livelihood in a liberal Russia that didn’t yet exist, and he hated anyone who would interfere with his plans for advancement. To save his own skin, Razumov takes the easiest and most right course of action with regards to upholding the law: he betrays Haldin to the police. Razumov’s protest to Nathalia in his confession, though, ironically turns the equation around: “remember that, amongst us, it is more difficult to lead a life of toil and self-denial than to go out in the street and kill from conviction” (265). The irony is thick here: after betraying Haldin, Razumov consigned himself to a period of intense toil and self-denial in working as a double agent for the czarist police. In a sense, Haldin’s death lets Haldin off easy; it is Razumov who
must suffer the inescapable consequences in confessing his betrayal to Haldin’s family. This complex situation, and Razumov’s multiple perspectives gained from the multiple roles he plays, give profound ironic depth to this story begun through Haldin’s passionate revolutionary melodrama.

Conrad was well aware of the power of irony in his crafting of these two novels. In his 1920 “Author’s Note” to *The Secret Agent*, Conrad claims that “[e]ven the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind, was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity” (xxxviii). Conrad’s irony allows him to work in two valences at once: he could offer sympathy for certain characters in certain situations just as he scorns them through his acerbic criticism. It is irony which melodrama seeks to defy in the first place: the message must get through with the one intended meaning intact. There should be no “sham meaning” in melodramatic rhetoric, and any attempt to find such a meaning would destroy the melodrama. Other than Haldin, the other earnest revolutionary in *Under Western Eyes* is Sophia Antonovna, who warns Razumov that “women, children, and revolutionists hate irony, which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action” (207). Sophia must believe that she is engaged in a noble struggle against czarist oppression, that her comrades all share her convictions, and that Razumov does as well. The irony, of course, is that she insists on banishing irony from the character who, as a double agent, is in the most ironic position of anyone (though she later learns that the notorious assassin Nikita is a double agent as well). While Conrad offers Sophia pity as the orphaned daughter of an honest man crushed by the autocracy, who joined the
revolutionaries at age fifteen for lack of any other family, he scorns her in her misguided convictions and her willful blindness to look deeper into matters.

Conrad uses his irony to render supposed anarchist menaces like Karl Yundt and Michaelis, Ivanovitch and Madame de S. as shams, whose impotence or cowardice through their grotesque caricatures belies their appearance of conviction. Conrad’s irony that allows him to show pity and scorn simultaneously, though, is reserved for the more dynamic characters. In “The Informer,” the irony of Razumov’s double-agency is combined with Haldin’s fanaticism. This story, for all intents and purposes, seemed to serve as an experiment for Conrad in character and theme for both The Secret Agent and Under Western Eyes. The titular informer in the story is a handsome young man named Sevrin, whose loyalty no one thought to question until a false police sting operation staged by the anarchists to catch the rat in their crew forced Sevrin to reveal himself. Sevrin’s fanaticism automatically turns on the anarchists before they apparently kill him, his body discovered in the basement several months later. Sevrin shouts at the anarchists, “I have been thwarting, deceiving, and betraying you—from conviction” (97). The story’s narrator, Mr. X, claims that “a vague but ardent humanitarianism had urged him in his first youth into the bitterest extremity of negation and revolt” (100). This prefigures the Doctor of Language’s claim for Haldin in Under Western Eyes that “[n]o one is born an active revolutionist. The change comes disturbingly, with the force of a sudden vocation, bringing in its train agonizing doubts, assertive violences, an unstable state of the soul, till the final appeasement of the convert in the perfect fierceness of conviction” (199). However, Mr. X. says that “[a]fterwards his optimism flinched. He doubted and became lost. You have heard of converted atheists. These turn often into dangerous
fanatics, but the soul remains the same” (100). Sevrin is similar to Razumov in both his double agency and his ignoble end, but also resembles Haldin in his political fanaticism. The irony of this story-within-a-story is that he is an admirable character in his force of conviction, yet this conviction can switch poles as surely as it was first oriented towards one pole. Sevrin, this strange melding of both Razumov and Haldin, becomes the object of pity as much as scorn.

2. Irony and Sentimentality

If Conrad exposes the de-politicized words and acts of political melodrama for their “sham meaning,” then how is he able to acknowledge emotional earnestness? For one, Conrad shuns all forms of political idealism that are so enchanting for the impressionable followers of utopian visions (e.g., Peter Ivanovitch or Michaelis) or the adherents of apocalyptic schemes of violent class revolutions (e.g., Karl Yundt). In taking such an anti-idealistic view of revolution, Conrad condemns the sentimentalizing of politics by which demagogues with ulterior motives of personal advancement would manipulate the emotions and impressions of political subjects.

Conrad’s prescription for invoking the sentiments correctly can be found in his “Familiar Preface” to *A Personal Record*. After the passage where he appraises the power of the “right word” and the “right accent” to move the masses, Conrad offers advice for the *moderation* of sentiments in fiction. Conrad sees the overt use of sentimentalism in fiction as nothing other than a contemptible means to manipulate the readers’ emotions. He warns, “[t]here can be nothing more humiliating than to see the shaft of one’s emotion missing the mark of either laughter or tears. Nothing more humiliating!” explaining “this
for the reason that should the mark be missed, should the open display of emotion fail to
move, then it must perish unavoidably in disgust or contempt” (8). The “open display of
emotion” must move, but it is a gamble that the author must win. If such a maneuver
“misses the mark,” the readers will chastise the author for failing to appeal to their
emotions, and for daring to try so blatantly in the first place. “In order to move others
deeply,” Conrad explains, “we must deliberately allow ourselves to be carried away
beyond the bounds of our normal sensibility—innocently enough, perhaps, and of
necessity, like an actor who raises his voice on the stage above the pitch of natural
conversation—but still we have to do that. And surely this is no great sin” (11). Conrad,
however, cautions that “the danger lies in the writer becoming the victim of his own
exaggeration, losing the exact notion of sincerity, and in the end coming to despise truth
itself as something too cold, too blunt for his purpose—as, in fact, not good enough for
his insistent emotion” (ibid.). In striving for an emotional response, which in artless cases
involves overdrawn upon the full emotional resonance of a situation, the sentimental
writer would seemingly forego the complexities of the actual social realm, complexities
that Conrad is trying to capture with some fidelity. It’s a fine line the author walks when
trafficking in sentiment, as Conrad warns that “[f]rom laughter and tears the descent is
easy to sniveling and giggles” for the reader who’s wise to the sentimental author’s game
(ibid.).

On the other hand, though, Conrad cautioned against the cold, realistic objectivity
for which some realist writers strive. Conrad once told the novelist Arnold Bennett, “You
stop just short of being absolutely real because you are faithful to your dogmas of
realism” (qtd. in Berthoud 113). In trying to account for the full complexity of the social
situation, the realist writer concerned with encyclopedically detailed description misses the finer complexities of the social realm he is attempting to present. Conrad, instead, prefers the examination of the moral quandaries in the manner of Henry James, who offers detailed reflections upon the moral qualities of the events in his novels rather than attempting to account for social problems in all their material conditions, as does Bennett.

Conrad thus prescribes “admiration,” “pity” and “respect” in treating human affairs in the novel (12). A certain measure of “[r]esignation, not mystic, not detached, but resignation open-eyed, conscious, and informed by love,” is what the author should strive for, which is “the only one of our feelings for which it is impossible to become a sham” (13). This fidelity to human affairs as informed by respect and pity would rein in the temptation to sentimentalize: “And he is not insensible who pays them the undemonstrative tribute of a sigh which is not a sob, and of a smile which is not a grin” (ibid.).

If Conrad’s social views ought to be informed by love, pity, admiration, and respect, then how does Conrad resist successfully the temptation to sentimentalize? Moreover, how does Conrad do so without seeming heartless, sadistically subjecting his characters to situations of ordinary and extraordinary suffering in his novels? Conrad makes ironic use of sentiment to garner sympathy for the real sufferers, while positioning the readers’ sympathies against those who would offer them “sham sentiment” while denying them real sympathy. Conrad claimed that “applying an ironic method” to his subject “in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone” would allow him to “say all [he] felt in scorn as well as in pity” (xxxviii). Irony pervades Conrad’s works, and many critics credit this irony for providing the sharp edge of all of his social and political
criticism. Conrad’s verbal, situational, and dramatic ironies overlap and complement each other, for example, in his most famously ironic scene in which Marlow tells Kurtz’s Intended at the end of *Heart of Darkness* that the dying Kurtz whispered her name, as Marlow and the reader know that Kurtz actually whispered the words, “the horror!” The ironic venom of Marlow’s lie is that “the horror” can be seen to actually refer to the Intended herself, for it is romantic sentiment such as hers that underwrote the imperialist ideology that sent Kurtz over the edge in the first place. All the while, the Intended can take some comfort in the unknowingly false belief that Kurtz whispered her actual name.

However, if Conrad’s fictive world is peopled with thoroughgoing shams like Adolf Verloc or the inevitable betrayers of their ideals like Nostromo, what do we do when faced with subjects that would deserve our sympathy? Anthony Winner argues that, on the face of it, the sympathy we would have for Winnie and Stevie in *The Secret Agent* is absurd when given to such pathetic objects. However, irony rescues them from this absurdity: “Stevie’s value expresses that mixture of illusion, moral truth, and faith that allows us to be more than our unaided personalities” (83). For Winner, though, this irony can serve no further rehabilitative purpose; no alternative to their plight is offered, and we are left with only a fuller view of the desolation of their situation. Take the case of Stevie being killed by his father-figure Adolf’s scheming. Adolf exploits Stevie’s desire for love and security by way of his sister Winnie’s desire to protect him. Conrad compels us to feel sympathy for Stevie, leading us to believe that he suffers from some sort of cognitive disorder, and who in any case has been abused and misunderstood all his life. Stevie’s disastrous end, being blown up by Adolf’s bomb, is so extraordinary that it renders our sympathy beyond absurd, though. Conrad spares us the actual sight of the
explosion; all he shows us is the post-mortem remains of Stevie, gory bits and pieces of him on the examining table. Stevie’s dismembered body makes it difficult for Winnie to mourn coherently for him, and the absurd circumstances of his death undercut any seriousness that would otherwise be given to such mourning in Winner’s view. Stevie, while alive, was a ready object for our sympathies, and in the end he gets objectified in the purest sense, as only the material parts of him attest to his existence. If Stevie’s original irony is that our “mixture of illusion, moral truth, and faith” allows him to be more than his social self, then for Winnie the irony of Stevie’s ultimate fate sweeps this rehabilitation away again. He’s no more than an object, or parts of an object, and our sympathy was far in excess. Moreover, Winnie’s sympathy was powerless to save him from this extraordinary fate, which destroys her illusions.

For Jacques Berthoud, however, Conrad’s irony is corrective for the reader by showing the social hypocrisies which might well inform his own worldview, and which he can perhaps identify as such. Berthoud claims, on the one hand, that Conrad’s irony “supports the anti-sentimental bias of realism” in that Conrad does not spare his characters from disaster, and our sympathies for the characters may very well be quelled (112). On the other hand, Berthoud claims that Conrad’s irony “serves a richer realism, in which the recognition of weakness and absurdity does not rule out the acknowledgement of genuine feeling” (110). The ironic novel positions its audience by compelling them to examine from new angles the assumptions they bring with them to the reading. Hence, if we can possibly take a distant, detached view from the suffering, then our sympathies were never genuine to begin with. Conrad’s irony, for Berthoud, “checks the sense of superiority that refrigerates our most altruistic impulses, by disclosing the humanity that
survives in even the most stricken of lives” (112). If we can ridicule Stevie, one of the true victims of the novel, because we see how poor and uninformed he is, then we view his entire situation from a position of social privilege. We know better than Stevie does, and this is exactly the social attitude that Conrad seeks to interrogate. Conrad positions his audience with regard to their sympathies. Stevie’s outrage at hearing stories of human cruelty, and his desire to take the downtrodden world to bed with him, may all be laughable to a callous audience, yet poignant to a sympathetic one. And how callous are we, anyway, to mock Stevie’s earnest humanitarian sympathies? The irony is directed back at us.

Conrad doesn’t dismiss sentimentalism altogether—just a disingenuous, bourgeois sort, and his situational irony allows him to do so by positioning the reader with regard to his or her sympathies. Conrad sought to find a way to engage sympathies that bypassed the inadequacies of mere words and images to garner an affective response. In “Autocracy and War,” Conrad claimed that “In this age of knowledge our sympathetic imagination…remains strangely impervious to information, however correctly and even picturesquely conveyed” (84). He gave the following graphic example, recounting the human tolls of the recently-ended Russo-Japanese War:

An overworked horse falling in front of our windows, a man writhing under a cart-wheel in the street, awaken more genuine emotion, more horror, pity, and indignation than the stream of reports, appalling in their monotony, of tens of thousands of maimed bodies groaning in ditches, crawling on the frozen ground, filling the field hospitals; of the hundreds of thousands of survivors no less pathetic and even more tragic in being left alive by fate to the wretched exhaustion of their pitiful toil. (84)

Conrad believed that attempts to garner sympathy by conveying the suffering of others are doomed to failure because of one’s tendency to assimilate and rationalize distressing
information. In this example, Conrad provides an up-close example of everyday disaster—a fallen horse—that one might encounter in the streets of London that might distress onlookers, but he calls the statistical reports of war casualties “appalling,” rather, in their “monotony.” Statistics are dead on the page and fail to make any sort of sensory impression. To these monotonous facts Conrad applies human images of maimed and exhausted bodies, arguing that these images should also be made to incite as much horror as the abused horse or crushed pedestrian. Conrad claims that “[d]irect vision of the fact, or the stimulus of a great art,” which would provide images that would compel an immediate and visceral response “can alone make [the imagination] turn and open its eyes heavy with blessed sleep” (84). We need to have images thrown in our faces, since statistical abstractions cannot convey the actual suffering.

However, as many theorists have pointed out, there is no guarantee that any visual or verbal representation can bring forth an affective response. There is no guarantee that even “direct vision of the fact,” such as what Conrad attempted to provide with his images of anguished soldiers, can have any real affect upon its audience. Elaine Scarry addressed this problem in *The Body in Pain*, claiming that “the verbal sign is so inherently unstable that when not carefully controlled…it can have different effects and can even be intentionally enlisted for the opposite purposes, invoked not to coax pain into visibility but to push it into further invisibility” (13). The image, then, can actually have the opposite effect that the presenter intended, rendering the pain even more abstract and easy to ignore. In this vein, Susan Sontag claimed that “[a]s one can become habituated to horror in real life, one can become habituated to the horror of certain images” (82). After all, we can always close the book or the photo album, comforting ourselves with
the choice we have not to look. Conrad was also aware of this problem in “Autocracy and War,” conceding that “that saving callousness which reconciles us to the conditions of our existence, will assert itself under the guise of assent to fatal necessity, or in the enthusiasm of a purely esthetic admiration of the rendering” (84). It is our natural impulse, which Conrad says is essential for helping us maintain our “peace of mind,” to reconcile the distressing images by assimilating them into our realm of experience. Either we rationalize that war and carnage are the way of the world and borne out of “fatal necessity,” or we appreciate the experience of being frightened and unsettled in a merely aesthetic sense, and we are then free to go about our daily lives. Either response helps us maintain equilibrium, and neither journalism nor art can shake people out of such day-to-day complacency.

In Under Western Eyes, the narrating Doctor of Languages, who serves as Conrad’s analytical register for the events therein, admits to just such self-conscious cynicism about the genuineness of his own sympathies. The doctor discourses to Nathalia about the difference in temperament and outlook between the Western Europeans and the Russians in that her people, the Russians, “detest life, the irremediable life of the earth as it is, whereas we westerners cherish it with perhaps an equal exaggeration of its sentimental value” (80). The learned discourses of Western science allow the Doctor to make such nationalistic and ethnic generalizations. The Westerner can condescend to see the Russians as backwards, superstitious, excitable, given to political intrigues: “To us Europeans of the West, all ideas of political plots and conspiracies seem childish, crude inventions for the theatre or a novel” (83). At several points in his narrative and in his dialogue with Nathalia, the Doctor speaks from a position of Western privilege, consoling
her that her family’s problems, where her brother can get entangled and die in revolutionary plots, are all due to the peculiar nature of the Russian temperament and political situation. The Doctor’s people, the English, have been through all that and know better. However, this gap in ideological perspectives that the Doctor supposes is very real, and forecloses his ability to grant genuine sympathy to Nathalia and her mother. He confesses that “my very real sympathy had no standpoint. The Western readers for whom this story is written will understand what I mean….Death is a remorseless spoliator. The anguish of irreparable loss is familiar to us all” (85). His sympathy can draw from their shared human experiences, but “the grief I had brought to these two ladies had gruesome associations…associations of bombs and gallows—a lurid, Russian colouring which made the complexion of my sympathy uncertain” (ibid.). The Doctor secretly dismisses the Haldins’ problems as those belonging to some other culture, not his own. Moreover, the Doctor is aware that his sentiments are racially determined; they have “a lurid, Russian colouring,” which takes shape in images of “bombs and gallows”—sensational images, signifying the supposed struggles of backwards people in distant lands. Because revolutions, real or imagined, are not an experience the Doctor has ever known in the West, and he can only imagine such experiences sensationalistically, his sympathy for the Haldins rings false.

Indeed, sentimentalism can be seen to serve a conservative function, an echo chamber for communicating existing bourgeois values and cultural norms. Many theorists are skeptical of the subversive power of sentiment, arguing that a sentimental appeal does not necessarily translate into altered ideological perceptions, let alone compel the subject to act. Ann Cvetkovich argues that sentiment operates through an affective structure that
is constructed by existing social and political forces. Cvetkovich claims that in the politics of literary sentiment (which she equates to “sensation” in her *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism*), the emotional appeal to readers that is made through foregrounding scenes of victimization works through sentiment’s capacity to “transfer the apparent naturalness of feeling to its representation” which serves to “consolidate the naturalness of the representation that produces that feeling” (34-35). Thus, any speaker may make a visceral appeal to his or her audience by charging a literary metaphor with emotion, making the underlying meaning of that metaphor seem as natural and reactive as the body’s reaction to pain. This amounts to the fetishization of the representation itself, as the melodramatic image of the violence is conferred the power to express the violence itself in definitive and monological terms. Such is the depoliticizing power of myth according to Barthes, as ideological concepts are given material shape that is meant to seem seamless and natural. For the Doctor of Languages, the Russian images of bombs and gallows are all that is needed to settle the matter: the Haldins’ problems are another culture’s problems, not his own. The surface of this myth is cracked just as the Doctor suspects that his sympathy is tainted by his unconscious invoking of such images. Yet he grants these images truth; the ideological distance between Westerners and Russians is too vast for any real sympathetic connection between him and the Haldins to be possible.

Laura Hinton argues furthermore that sentiment operates through a fundamentally sadomasochistic dynamic. Hinton claims that “[s]entiment is reproduced by sympathy’s endorsement of sadomasochistic, scopophilic practices” of what she calls the viewer’s “perverse gaze” (2). Where sympathy “is supposed to encourage the movement of
‘feeling’, through vicarious affect and identification with someone else’s emotion…yet the process of vision prevents any true movement associated with ‘feeling’” (16). Hinton claims that the sympathizer’s investment in the scene of violence and victimization is due to a sadomasochistic Schadenfreude, where the sympathy “conceals the desire for and use of power through identification” (16, italics hers). Hinton claims that Hume, as one of the earliest modern theorists of sympathy, saw sympathy operating passively as “a potential ‘force’ through which feelings between independent ‘human creatures’ are simply registered, and through that representation shared,” instead of compelling action to relieve the sufferer of his pain (22). “Through sympathy, the aggressivity of sentiment is safely, perversely, released” (ibid.), she argues, contending that this “desire for visual pleasure makes the sympathetic spectator a fetishist and a voyeur” (2-3). Philip Fisher likewise claims that one’s sentimental reaction of “feeling and empathy” is most intense “where the capacity to act has been suspended” ([a]122). Thus, Fisher argues that art’s capacity to incite action is foreclosed by art’s very nature: “[b]y limiting the goal of art to the revision of images rather than to the incitement to action, sentimentality assumes a healthy and modest account of the limited and interior consequences of art” (122), consequences that need not be brought to objective fruition. Furthermore, Hinton argues that narrative reports of disasters cause us to take the most comfort in our safety and perverse pleasure in the suffering of others: “the operation of sympathy requires the very vividness of the ‘shimmering’ horrific image so that its spectator may be assured of his own shimmering luster and representational survival, his own mastering power” (234). Thus, these “shimmering disasters and a theater of horrors” only serve to enforce the distance the spectator feels from the objects of sympathy (ibid.). The viewer ultimately
moves past the whole situation, drawing closure in appreciating the fact that he is not the one who suffers.

Claims to the power of sentiment to compel political action should be regarded with extreme suspicion. Indeed, Marxist criticism posits that sentiment is a bourgeois conciliation to the injustices inherent in existing socioeconomic inequalities, that the bourgeoisie has no desire to really correct. This brings us once again to the author’s dilemma that Margaret Scanlan presented that I discuss in my Introduction. The author may draw an affective response from the reader, but there can be no guarantee that this affect will have any further-ranging effects. The only action that can be engendered is there in the story, and the reader of fiction realizes as much. Contrary to the intentions of a politically motivated author, situations of maddening injustice or scenes of shocking brutality in fiction may only reinforce the reader’s feelings of helplessness or resignation, or, as Hinton surmised, the reader’s sadomasochistic pleasure in seeing others suffer. Thus, we go back to the essential disconnect between intention and effect. Melodrama in literature or in politics is no guarantor that the audience will apprehend the scene, or feel the emotion, as intended. Sentiment, in many cases, is directly attributable to one’s subject-position. Certain viewers will feel certain emotions about certain objects, but not everyone can possibly feel the same emotions about the same objects. For example, certain objects may be used in a melodramatic narrative for the supposedly universal sentimental appeal they evoke, and indeed women, children, the elderly, the ill, the mentally infirm, and animals have been evoked in this way throughout the history of the novel and film. Their victimization may cause an extreme sympathetic response, and extreme revulsion for the ones inflicting the violence, among their audience. However,
such responses, as Cvetkovich theorized, are inevitably culturally constructed. One viewer’s subject position within a liberal bourgeois society may predispose him to react with extreme pity and revulsion in seeing a child killed. By contrast, another viewer’s subject position in a society in which such killing is commonplace may predispose him to react to the scene with indifference, if not ridicule.18 This is exactly the basis of the difference between Western and Russian subject positions that Conrad constructs as the Doctor of Languages tries to account for in Under Western Eyes: the Russians “detest life” whereas Westerners “cherish it with perhaps an equal exaggeration of its sentimental value.” This critique of Western sentiment is, of course, offered from the Doctor’s own constructed position as a self-consciously detached and supposedly objective observer, yet his commentary all throughout is steeped in his own culture’s dispositions and prejudices. Conrad’s treatment of violence in all its complexity accounts for the multiple subject positions among the characters and the viewers which would enable differing perspectives and emotional responses to scenes of violence.

In portraying the central terrorist act in The Secret Agent, Conrad dramatizes the problems that the terrorist melodrama has in its execution: though the attack may be intended to frighten a vast audience, manipulating their sentiments, there is no guarantee that it will produce such effects. The effects it does produce may not play out according to plan, and may even be contradictory to the original intent. Mr. Vladimir, the ostensibly Russian agent working for an unnamed foreign embassy, commissions Adolf Verloc to bomb the Greenwich Observatory, in an effort to turn British public opinion against the asylum granted to political refugees (and presumably refugees from Vladimir’s own country). Vladimir offers his amateur social critique that the English bourgeoisie “have
no imagination” and are “blinded by an idiotic vanity” (25). “What they want just now is a jolly good scare,” Vladimir tells Verloc; “this is the psychological moment to set your friends to work” (ibid.). According to Vladimir’s “philosophy of the bomb” (27), “the attack must have all the shocking senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy” (28), which would confound the terminally mediocre bourgeois imagination. Vladimir’s proposed target is the Greenwich Observatory, since he believes that science is the “sacrosanct fetish of today” (25) for the masses, and would cause more irrational fear and psychological damage to the European bourgeois audience than any attack on a head of state, national treasure, or innocent civilian. To Vladimir, an attack on a scientific symbol (that of “time” itself) would “combine[] the greatest possible regard for humanity with the most alarming display of ferocious imbecility” (28) in that the motives would be unclear to most, but it would be apparent to all that the English way of life was being violated.

Contrary to Vladimir’s intentions, the bomb plot goes terribly awry as Stevie blows himself up and causes a minor stir among the press. After the news of the befuddling incident had died down, the Lady Patroness of the aristocratic Explorer’s Club tells the Assistant Commissioner of police that Mr. Vladimir “has been threatening society with all sorts of horrors” “apropos of this explosion in Greenwich Park. It appears we all ought to quake in our shoes at what’s coming if those people are not suppressed all over the world. I had no idea this was such a grave affair” (183). Mr. Vladimir is apparently confounded that his bourgeois audience can’t make the connection he intends, and he exasperatedly tries to draw the connection explicitly between the bomb and the “horrors” to come for them. The problem is, none of them believe it, and they see Mr.
Vladimir as little more than a social nuisance. Granted, Vladimir’s plot failed embarrassingly, but even if it had succeeded and the Observatory had been bombed, the Lady Patroness’s blasé response hints that this attack upon the “sacrosanct fetish of the day” would still not produce the emotional effect he intended. Conrad here creates a comedy of manners, in which bourgeois sentiment’s relation to melodrama is ironically deconstructed; the Lady Patroness is unable to grant Mr. Vladimir the sentimental response for which he was agitating in his melodramatic tale of class warfare.

News of terrorist disaster may have the power to generate intense fear (at least for the moment), but it also provides the scopophilic pleasure that Hinton discusses. Gruesome news tends to perversely titillate the public. This is demonstrated by the public response to the actual failed Greenwich Observatory bombing in 1894, upon which Conrad loosely based the incident in *The Secret Agent*. Martial Bourdin was the French immigrant blown up in the accidental explosion, rumored to be the brother-in-law of a known anarchist pamphleteer.19 According to the autopsy published in the newspapers, Bourdin’s unidentifiable remains, his “liver, kidneys, and stomach,” pierced with large pieces of shrapnel, were scattered all over Greenwich Park (qtd. in Hay 223). However, rather than being driven indoors in horror, crowds visited the site in droves in the following days, as “one of the Park-keepers stated that ‘in all his experience he had never known so many people in the Park in a single day, except on Bank Holidays, even when the band was playing in the summer months’” (ibid.). Furthermore, “photographs of the ‘remains,’ consisting of an old boot (complete with foot), bits of rag and cats’ meat” were “hastily produced by local private enterprise bent on satisfying public demand” (ibid. 223-24). Such are the affects of a “diabolical” bombing produced by media sensation, as
people take a perverse pleasure in being so close to the attack, taking in Hinton’s “‘shimmering’ horrific image” without suffering the destruction themselves.

The sadomasochistic pleasure we might gain from reading about Stevie’s remains recaptures that of the 1894 crowds who flocked to the park and bought postcards of the carnage. Conrad’s description of Stevie’s remains, after being collected and displayed in the police station, are astoundingly similar to the actual newspaper reports: a “waterproof sheet was spread over that table in the manner of a table cloth—a heap of rags, scorched and blood stained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast” (72). These bits of rag and human remains for a “cannibal feast” bear gruesome resemblance to the newspapers’ accounts of the “bits of rag and cats’ meat.” This carnivorous image of the “cannibal feast” also anticipates the scene of Verloc’s own murder by Winnie with the steak knife, with which she stabs him while he wolfishly eats a bloody steak. Kurtz’s rites in the Congo of Heart of Darkness could be no more barbaric than these sensational murders of radical violence gone horribly awry in darkest London.

This perverse voyeuristic pleasure that certain witnesses gain from sight of the carnage serves to disrupt the generic conventions that would accompany the murder investigation, as Conrad strips the police procedural/detective story, as ushered in by Chief Inspector Heat, of the reader’s faith in the powers of ratiocination therein. Conrad uses hints of dark comedy, as the detached response of the constable who first inspected the bombing scene amounts to black humor. The constable callously remarks to Heat, “He’s all there. Every bit of him. It was a job” (72). “You used a shovel?” Heat asks him, in the throes in his initial shock and nausea. “Had to in one place,” the “solid constable”
nonchalantly replies; “I sent a keeper to fetch a spade. When he heard me scraping the ground with it he leaned his forehead against a tree, and was as sick as a dog” (73). The constable is able to keep a stiff upper lip and maintain a sense of wry, whimsical detachment from the scene. His offhand description of the event, as if scraping up the obliterated remains of a bomb victim with a shovel were all in a day’s work, is at remarkable odds from the trauma that Heat experiences simultaneously.

While granting the sadomasochistic, or at least sadistic pleasure that an audience may glean from the sight of carnage, Conrad importantly accounts for the horror and trauma that others may feel. In an important turn, Conrad employs situational irony in this examining room scene to dispel the mirth that the constable in the background may temporarily inspire. This is done as Chief Inspector Heat experiences the full horror of the bombing’s effect on Stevie in a private way that a more jaded public, such as the constable or the newspaper readers, might not. Heat is a slightly bumbling but proper London police officer whose true passion is catching conventional thieves. He silently resents and dreads the anarchists because they don’t play by traditional rules and cannot be negotiated with on rational terms. However, Heat’s cocksure composure, which had already been shaken by his chance encounter with the Professor moments earlier, was now rocked to its core by the spectacle of the obliterated Stevie. Heat’s fortitude of mind keeps him from recoiling at the sight, but he is horrified all the same. Stevie’s disintegrated body takes on the power of speech all its own in Heat’s sympathetic imagination:

The Chief Inspector, stooping guardedly over the table, fought down the unpleasant sensation in his throat. The shattering violence of destruction which had made of that body a heap of nameless fragments affected his feelings with a sense of ruthless cruelty, though his reason told him the effect must have been as
swift as flash of lightning. The man, whoever he was, had died instantaneously; and yet it seemed impossible to believe that a human body could have reached that state of disintegration without passing through the pangs of inconceivable agony. No physiologist, and still less of a metaphysician, Chief Inspector Heat rose by the force of sympathy, which is a form of fear, above the vulgar conception of time. He remembered all he had ever read in popular publications of long and terrifying dreams dreamed in the instant of waking; of the whole past life lived with frightful intensity by a drowning man as his doomed head bobs up, streaming, for the last time. The inexplicable mysteries of conscious existence beset Chief Inspector Heat till he evolved a horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained between two successive winks of an eye (73).

Heat’s shock at the sight was intensified by “the force of sympathy,” which compelled him to imagine the “inconceivable agony” that Stevie must have felt during his death. Even though this sympathy is “a form of fear” borne out of Heat’s own fear of a painful and violent death, it is sufficient to compel this most proper and buttoned-down officer of the law to feel the horror to which the constable’s less sympathetic imagination makes him immune. The ratiocinative Heat becomes the primary audience to the melodrama that Mr. Vladimir had intended, though this horror is here engendered on a purely individual level, while news of the bombing fails to inspire anything more than a passing concern for the rest of the city. While acknowledging the dark humor that it’s possible for some to glean from this absurd and gruesome act of carnage, Conrad refuses to give this comedy its full due. Chief Inspector Heat’s horror at the sight of Stevie’s dismembered corpse undercuts his professional charge to regard the evidence objectively, revealing the unpredictability of affective responses among a wide populace.

Winnie Verloc was spared the sight of her brother’s remains, but her sympathetic imagination goes even further than Heat’s post-mortem view in providing the full details. “Greenwich Park. A park! That’s where the boy was killed. A park—smashed branches, torn leaves, gravel, bits of brotherly flesh and bone, all spouting up together in the
manner of a firework” (212). The imagery turns rankly melodramatic, “where after a rainlike fall of mangled limbs the decapitated head of Stevie lingered suspended alone, and faded out slowly like the last star of a pyrotechnic display” (213). This image of Stevie’s decapitated head might bring voyeuristic pleasure to the sadomasochistic audience, and it might seem as if Conrad had violated his prescription for moderation in representing violence and sentimental responses, in not overdoing it, as expressed in *A Personal Record*. However, Conrad shows the gruesome cost that goes beyond the contents of this melodrama of the bomb. This grievous incident befell a woman who had devoted her entire impoverished life to Stevie, which included marrying the man who would eventually blow him up. In the passage between Winnie’s learning the news of Stevie’s death and her stabbing of Verloc, Winnie’s trauma moves beyond the horror of this “shimmering, horrific image” to the sting of insult that such an incident brought to her own personal integrity.

In his Author’s Note to the novel, Conrad claimed that he always believed the novel was really all about Winnie, whose “dawning conviction of…maternal passions” provided the dramatic core of the novel (xxxvii). However, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might claim, the audience’s varied responses to this object of sentiment would overdetermine Conrad’s intention to dignify Winnie’s travails. Conrad, then, accounts for all various responses to Winnie through his mixing of fiction genres from the extended scene leading up to Verloc’s murder all the way through to the novel’s conclusion.

One type of audience response would be to give pity and sympathy to Winnie for her troubles, to see her murder of Verloc as justified, and to feel all the more sorrow for her resulting despair and suicide. Conrad uses the grittiest of social realism to portray
Winnie as a long-suffering sister, wife, and daughter whose struggles to care for her family went unappreciated all her life, and horrifically disregarded by her own husband. Conrad paints her life as one of “countless breakfast trays carried up and down innumerable stairs, of endless haggling over pence, of the endless drudgery of sweeping, dusting, cleaning, from basement to attics; while the impotent mother, staggering on swollen legs, cooked in the grimy kitchen, and poor Stevie, the unconscious presiding genius of all their toil, blacked the gentlemen’s boots in the scullery” (199). Winnie’s vengeful stabbing of Verloc serves as her speech act to signify all her rage, for which the “phrases of sham sentiment” would fall far short (243). In this sense, she takes on the characteristics of Stevie, who was always “rich in suffering but indigent in words” and who resorted to drastic, melodramatic acts of violence to signify his righteous rage (243).

This social realism is compounded by Winnie’s own sentimental fiction, in her desire to make a pleasant home for Stevie and her mother, through reliance on her husband, whom she always fancied as the father figure that Stevie never had. This fiction is, of course, wiped clean by the disaster that follows, and any readers taken in by the sentimentality of Winnie’s own illusions may also feel Winnie’s betrayal especially keenly. In Winnie’s murder of Verloc and her subsequent escape with Ossipon, the story takes on the quality of a lurid murder-suspense thriller. In this genre shift, Winnie gives an agonized confession of the murder and takes the hapless Ossipon along in the escape plot. Ossipon, playing the part of an amateur criminologist, defers to his current readings from Lombroso to analyze this “criminal” type, as marked by her phrenology, psychology, etc. This invites readers to do the same, interpreting all of her actions from the detached, scientific perspective of the armchair detective. In Ossipon’s final
maneuver to rid himself of Winnie, the genre shifts to one of slapstick comedy as he jumps from the train moments before it can take off with the two of them, inviting readers to view the whole situation through the lens of dark comedy. The final genre shift is the journalistic pronouncement that “an impenetrable mystery is destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair” (250) in referring to Winnie’s suicide by drowning. This is sensationalistic reporting for an anonymous act that has little impact on anyone in the world at that point except for Ossipon, who alone knew of the circumstances that drew her to suicide. Rather than provide the full details of Winnie’s drowning, Conrad draws back and gives us the information through the sensational press, a seemingly self-reflexive move that responds to his various genre twists as the plot rushes headlong towards the disastrous conclusion. The newspaper’s trite dismissal is, of course, insufficient to account for what the reader, and Ossipon, know has actually happened, and Ossipon’s bewilderment as he walks dazed out into the street after learning the news is, finally, the proper register for the reader’s own response.

Verloc’s reaction to Stevie’s death, for which he was directly responsible, was quite the opposite of Winnie’s, and he regarded the situation with irritation, as nothing more than an inconvenient setback. In Verloc’s mind, caught up as he was with his business pursuits, the bombing had “only an episodic character, as part of a greater disaster” (198). Though Verloc was “[b]orn of industrious parents for a life of toil,” he had “embraced indolence from an impulse as profound, as inexplicable, and as imperious as the impulse which directs a man’s preference for one particular woman in a given thousand. He was too lazy even for a mere demagogue….It was too much trouble. He required a more perfect form of ease; or it might have been that he was the victim of a
philosophical unbelief in the effectiveness of every human effort” (11). Thus, Verloc’s
disingenuous sentiment is a response typical of the bourgeois mentality that would hold
business to be the top priority, and shun emotional connection as a sham, a disingenuous
formality. Conrad calls Mr. Verloc “a humane man” who “had come home prepared to
allow every latitude to his wife’s affection for her brother” (191). Verloc is perturbed to
see that Winnie cannot come to her senses and snap out of her lament. Conrad facetiously
says that “in this he was excusable, since it was impossible for him to understand it
without ceasing to be himself” (ibid.). In this sense, Verloc is a typical specimen of
bourgeois homo economicus, who is monstrous in his banality. He had sustained himself
and his family through espionage and double-agency, he weighed other people’s lives
only in terms of his own monetary reward, and therefore, how could he be expected to
show any genuine sentiment for the sister of the boy whose death had thwarted his plans?
Conrad puts the question to his bourgeois readers: would we act the same way as Verloc?

In making a show of consoling Winnie, Verloc uses the strategy of calculating the
cost-benefits of Stevie’s death: “From every other point of view it was rather
advantageous. Nothing can equal the everlasting discretion of death” (193). For a witness
of Stevie’s obliterated remains, Chief Inspector Heat was swept away by his sympathetic
imagination, compelling him to contemplate the intense agony that Stevie must have felt
in the moments of his death. Verloc ignores any notion of Stevie’s pain, and views the
incident purely in terms of his own material advantages. This is akin to the technique of
desensitization that Elaine Scarry says was used by Nazi death camp guards as a coping
mechanism: “If the guard’s awareness begins to follow the path of the bullet, the path
itself can be bent so that he himself rather than the prisoner is the bullet’s destination: his
movement toward a recognition of the internal experience of an exploding head and loss of life is interrupted and redirected toward a recognition of his own loss of three pfennig [for the bullet]” (13). This material rationalization is horrifically small compensation for committing otherwise unthinkable violence, but Scarry says that “the work of the false motive is formal, not substantive; it prevents the mind from ever getting to the place where it would have to make such comparisons” between the lost three pfennig and the life of his victim (ibid.). This is the crux of Conrad’s social critique in *The Secret Agent*: the true danger to society is the prevalence of bourgeois economic concerns, and the “sham sentiments” that give such concerns the appearance of civility, at the expense of true sentimental regard and sympathy for others.²⁰

Winnie’s visceral reaction to the bombing, which results in her other case of murder ancillary to the bombing, thematically fulfills Vladimir’s desire to unleash a state of shock of panic, and the Professor’s desire to unleash “madness and despair,” though not in a way that either could have foreseen or intended. Verloc accidentally brought about the carnage that Vladimir said he would never dream of ordering, but Verloc reassured himself that “Stevie’s violent disintegration, however disturbing to think about, only assured the success; for, of course, the knocking down of a wall was not the aim of Mr. Vladimir’s menaces, but the production of a moral effect” (193). Conrad’s deadpan irony is at its richest here, as a “moral effect” did indeed play out in the Verlocs’ own house in a uniquely dreadful way. However, the public titillation over the carnage, and indifference to the threat of anarchist terror, may in fact serve as the most powerful undoing of the plot, in ways that the Professor and Mr. Vladimir could not foresee. Perhaps the masses could not be moved for long at all.
The final point I wish to make is that Stevie is the one true “revolutionary” of The Secret Agent. Stevie is the only character who responds viscerally to the real or conjectured suffering of the downtrodden, whether by setting off fireworks to signify his rage upon hearing the ill treatment of German soldiers, or blurting out such simplistic but genuine mottos as “bad world for poor people” upon listening to the cab driver’s accounts of his toils. Stevie’s actions are not mere “pose and gesture,” in the words of Mr. X. Stevie’s words are the only ones spoken without “sham meaning,” the only phrases without “sham sentiment.” The anarchists certainly lack such conviction or passionate intensity. This brings me around again to the point Conrad made through the Doctor in Under Western Eyes, that the earnest are always the ones to be betrayed in the revolution, once it is snatched from them by the hypocrites. Stevie’s death while doing Verloc’s bidding ironically illustrates this point. The Professor’s fears that the masses might, after all, be “impervious to sentiment, to logic, to terror too perhaps” proves unfounded, since the genuine humanitarians, like Stevie, will always be swayed by sentiment and a simplistic form of logic (69). Stevie illustrates Conrad’s point that the spirit of revolution frees one from all scruples as regards ideas; Stevie has ideas, but they are simplistic and juvenile and easily swayed by melodramatic rhetoric. Stevie would be the ideal audience for the Conrad of “Autocracy and War” who wished to make the suffering of the Russian soldiers vividly real through his power of description. Conrad might have had Stevie in mind when he praised the power of words like “glory” or “pity” to move the masses in his Preface to A Personal Record. Among all the characters in The Secret Agent, Stevie may be the only one above all rebuke. Yet, he is socially defective, a “half-wit,” easily manipulable by the worst elements to come into his sphere of life. And this is the
fundamental point that Conrad makes about revolutionaries: the revolutionary spirit may inspire the best of us, but those who succumb to the melodrama without sober reflection, as Stevie cannot do, are the half-wits. And those who stoke the fires of revolution are the opportunistic, the hypocritical, the cowardly, or the fanatical, the worst that could be expected to steer society after a revolution.
CHAPTER 2

The Necessary Murder:

Ideology and Moral Conflict in the Spanish Civil War

To-morrow the rediscovery of romantic love,
The photographing of ravens; all the fun under
    Liberty’s masterful shadow;
To-morrow the hour of the pageant-master and the musician,

The beautiful roar of the chorus under the dome;
To-morrow the exchanging of tips on the breeding of terriers,
    The eager election of chairmen
By the sudden forests of hands. But to-day the struggle.

To-morrow for the young the poets exploding like bombs,
The walks by the lake, the weeks of perfect communion;
    To-morrow the bicycle races
Through the suburbs on summer evenings. But to-day the struggle.

To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death,
The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;
    To-day the expanding of powers
On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.

    —From W.H. Auden, “Spain” (1937)

    ****

Personally I would not speak so lightly of murder. It so happens that I have seen the bodies of murdered
men—I don’t mean killed in battle, I mean murdered. Therefore I have some conception of what murder
means—the terror, the hatred, the howling relatives, the post-mortems, the blood, the smells. To me murder
is something to be avoided. So it is to any ordinary person. (516)

    —George Orwell, “Inside the Whale” (1940)

In a time of future peace and prosperity, how can we reflect upon the violence, even
atrocities, that we commit in wartime? If the end really is achieved, can we reconcile
ourselves with the means we used to achieve it, even if we killed in service of the Cause?
W.H. Auden seemed to believe so at the time of writing his poem “Spain,” and was
poetically resolved to stare this reality in the face—the reality of committing “necessary
murder” while risking his own death—empowered by utopian visions of the future to be
won. What strikes one about Auden’s poem in its earlier stanzas (prior to those excerpted above) is the almost naïve embrace of idealistic social mission—building the “just city,” consenting to the “romantic death” in a “suicide pact”—to which the persona of “Spain” lures the young man as by siren song. This political idealism is tempered by the poem’s final stanzas, four of which appear in the excerpt above, where Auden catalogs images of a future socialist society in Spain, which, ironically, happen to look much like the bourgeois comforts of suburban England in his own time—walks by the lake, bicycle races on summer evenings, the “exchanging of tips on the breeding of terriers” and the “rediscovery of romantic love.” All of those country comforts are for the years ahead, but today we must do our duty for the cause. Revealingly, Auden interrupts these pastoral images with the notion of what moral and physical sacrifices the fight will require—“the deliberate increase in the chances of death” and the “conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder” along with the less melodramatic acknowledgment of the politics involved in the propaganda pamphlet and the Party meeting. There was business to be done now in 1937, and some of that entailed the political drudge work of meetings and committees, and some of that entailed politically sanctioned combat and killings.

Auden wrote “Spain” as an expression of the ideological fervor that had gripped tens of thousands of people outside of Spain throughout the Spanish Civil War of 1936 to 1939. Auden himself, like numerous artists at the time, actually did venture to Spain to serve the leftist Republican cause, which was under attack by Franco’s insurgent Fascists. Auden was at the time a member of the British Communist Party, and saw Spain as the ultimate battleground between the ideologies of Communism and Fascism. Auden wrote “Spain” before he actually went to Spain, where he served as an ambulance driver and
propaganda broadcaster but never saw any direct combat. Auden’s contemporary George Orwell also went to Spain to join the Republican cause as a British Socialist, but unlike Auden, Orwell actually did see combat as he fought for the Trotskyist POUM militia.

In his 1940 essay “Inside the Whale,” Orwell offers a battle-hardened and somewhat smug condemnation of idealistic and ignorant writers such as Auden who advocated or at least unproblematically accepted “murder” as a matter of ideological duty without ever having actually dirtied their hands, or troubled their souls, with it. For Orwell, Auden and his British Communist comrade-poet Stephen Spender typified the ideologue-author of the 1930s—one who turned to Communism as a coherent and compelling doctrine when all other inspiration for them had run out, but who still had some disingenuous humanitarian idealism to burn. Without ever having experienced any real hardship in England but fancying that they spoke for the working class, then, these ideologue-authors blew the trumpet call and tromped off to Spain, to serve as valiant soldiers of the workers’ army of the world. Orwell himself would also call himself guilty of this idealistic blindness in his later essays on totalitarianism. Nonetheless, where a generation of authors in the 1920s made careers out of reveling in the existential detritus of the post-World War I experience in Europe and America, condemning patriotism and flag-waving and God-and-Country rhetoric for emboldening a generation of young men to sacrifice their lives on the battlefield, a generation of 1930s authors, for a time, took up the banner of ideology—not country—and volunteered to serve in another deadly European war. If the Great War was a colossal shame and a horror, there in Spain, finally, was a war worth fighting. However, the very notion of a war being worth fighting—with all the requisite fear, physical pain, injury, and killing involved—has some sort of
powerful emotional machinery behind it that overrides “the rational avoidance of these things.”

Granted, after the war ended in defeat for the Republicans, it was easy for Orwell to condemn those whom he saw as at least as naïve as he was in fighting it. In “Inside the Whale,” Orwell said that “Nearly all the dominant writers of the 1930s belonged to the soft-boiled emancipated middle class and were too young to have effective memories of the Great War” (515-16). Thus, “To people of that kind such things as purges, secret police, summary executions, imprisonment without trial, etc. etc. are too remote to be terrifying” (516). Orwell’s caricature here of Auden’s vision of the “Communist Party-Man” is droll: “In the morning a couple of political murders, a ten-minutes’ interlude to stifle ‘bourgeois’ remorse, and then a hurried luncheon and a busy afternoon and evening chalking walls and distributing leaflets. All very edifying” (ibid.). But Orwell then focuses on Auden’s phrase “necessary murder” in the poem, which he says could only have been written by someone to whom “murder” is “at most a word.” He dismisses the poet by asserting that “Auden’s brand of amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled. So much of left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire by people who don’t even know that fire is hot” (ibid.). The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the coming of the dusk, and by 1940 Orwell and most other writers of his generation learned only too late just how destructive the ideologies they upheld in the 1930s actually were on a totalitarian scale. But at the time of the Spanish Civil War, the apotheosis of leftist activism among writers and intellectuals of the Old Left, there were plenty who at least told themselves that they
were fighting a world-historical battle, and who were ready to kill for their cause, or who praised those who would.

This fervor felt by politically committed artists—ideologues mostly of the Left throughout the 1930s—is the basis of this chapter’s critique. How was it that so many authors of the time were mobilized to pledge their public support, if not their fiction, to support an ideological cause when many of them would never have done so only a few years earlier? What was it about the “just cause” of fighting Fascism that gave the Spanish Republicans an unquestioned high ground above the Fascists in that moment? There is a complex operation—politically, historically, and rhetorically—that turns the soldiers of the Right into terrorists, a term applied with seemingly great simplicity at that time. As I discuss in the Introduction, the use of the term “terrorism” is purely political, but takes on a moral valence of its own that surpasses mere politics. The violence that the Fascists committed was figured at the time as incomprehensibly evil. From one political standpoint, the Fascists’ violence was terrorist in that Franco’s was the insurgent force that was laying siege to a democratically elected government—by definition, his war effort was “illegal” and his violence terrorist. One important rhetorical operation that allowed the Left to portray the Fascists as evil and terrorist was the politicized use of the notion of “atrocity”: the civilian casualties, the slaughter of the innocent, which the Fascists committed. For the Left, the atrocities that the Republicans committed, then, could not be discussed, or had to be downplayed or justified as expediencies of a war that the Fascists brought upon them. As I will show, this was the ideological and moral stance taken by a majority of 1930s leftist authors who voiced their views on the war, and whose
own ideological rationalizations allowed them to ignore the violence committed by their own side which could also be deemed “terroristic.”

Did Auden step out of line, then, when he acknowledged the “necessary murder” that occurs during wartime—a reality that many authors of the time would just as soon ignore? As I will argue herein, Ernest Hemingway, that most idiosyncratic of modernist authors, yet one of the few whose style and outlook has been used to brand the entire literary dominant of the time, was uniquely equipped to face the ideological and moral ambivalences of committing to a cause, and killing for it, that make fighting Fascism less of the Manichean battle that many of his literary contemporaries made it seem. As a political outsider, Hemingway was not caught up in the Republican cause in the way that many of his contemporaries were. As an author who carefully regulated and expressed the emotions of extreme physical and mental agony in his writing, Hemingway’s style had a subversive politics of its own that enabled him to problematize the commitment to an ideological cause that requires one to kill in wartime—a commitment that becomes indistinguishable from the terrorism of the other side in its effects.

1. Ideology and Sentiment in the 1920s and 1930s

[The Battle of the Somme] took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes. You had to have a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you could remember. You had to have Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafes in Valence and beer gardens in Unter den Linden and weddings at the mairie, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather’s whiskers. This kind of battle was invented by Lewis Carroll and Jules Verne and whoever wrote Undine, and country deacons bowling and marraines in Marseilles and girls seduced in the back lanes of Wurtemburg and Westphalia. This was a love battle—there was a century of middle-class love spent here. This was the last love battle. All my beautiful lovely safe world blew itself up here with a great gust of high explosive love! (57)

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tender Is the Night (1934)

In this lucid passage from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night, the novel’s hero Dick Diver rhapsodizes to his expatriate friends about the massive carnage that had occurred
right there on the Somme battlefield just a few years earlier. He is sounding a jeremiad with a poetic flourish, assuming a self-righteous pose of cynical analysis as he indicts the bourgeois comforts and patriotic, domestic sentiment that imbue all of their lives for the reaction he can stir up among his friends. Yet Diver is also self-consciously recoiling in a horror that he can conceptualize and discourse upon. He realizes that the bourgeois values were responsible for mobilizing the masses to war, and this despair allows him to address others’ emotional suffering on a public level in a way that he cannot do on the private level. Fitzgerald’s entire novel problematizes the emotional connections of romantic relationships and family that surround Dick and Nicole Diver in the tumultuous, prolonged breakup of their marriage. However, early in the novel Fitzgerald uses the Somme battlefield—one of the most catastrophic battles in a war that was full of them—as the mise-en-scène for this laying bare of sentimental conventions, much more of which is to come in the novel.

As numerous critics have shown, the power of the nation-state is underwritten by the emotional investment that its citizens have in the nation’s binding social rituals, including those from popular culture and literature, which can help mobilize its populace to war. In his monumental study, Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson claims that “[n]ationalism belongs with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion’ rather than with ‘liberalism’ or ‘fascism’” (5). Anderson contends that “the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship”; therefore, “it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (7). The national holidays, the victory parades, the honoring of the nation’s ruling families are all overt examples of national rituals that mobilize the
allegiance of a nation’s people. Equally compelling, though, are the seemingly non-political domestic events that Diver indicts: Christmas, love for one’s grandparents, the *joie de vivre* of summer outings. The examples that Diver offers: cafes in Valence, beer gardens in Unter den Linden, and going to the Derby, exemplify fancied French, German, and English bourgeois customs, respectively. By close implication, Diver suggests that the non-political customs were crucial in enlisting the warring parties’ masses of soldiers. Diver’s companion Abe North, a World War I veteran who has very real reason to be cynical, catches the drift of Diver’s sermon and mocks: “The war’s spirit’s getting into me again. I have a hundred years of Ohio love behind me and I’m going to bomb out this trench,” as he hurls a rock he pretends is a grenade, hereby adding an American flavor of domestic sentiment (57-58). Rather than play along, Diver laments, “I couldn’t kid here….The silver cord is cut and the golden bowl is broken and all that, but an old romantic like me can’t do anything about it” (58). Diver acknowledges that he’s just as caught up in the mythos of these sentimental conventions. His consciousness of the sham of wartime valor and God-and-country rhetoric shows through, and he is able to critique these conventions in full view of their most disastrous consequences, but he realizes that he’s still an “old romantic” who still yearns for the comforts they brought him.

Such cynicism marked much of the writing of the 1920s, produced by the writers of the Lost Generation who came of age during and survived the First World War. This sense of dejection, of melancholia, imbues many of the classic works of this burgeoning period of high modernism: T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* to name just a few of the most celebrated ones. The embracing of this existential ennui in 1920s
writing has been critiqued extensively. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell claims that literature and philosophy for the rest of the twentieth century became starkly, caustically ironic in its outlook as a direct result of the First World War. Fussell writes, “the Great War was perhaps the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful ‘history’ involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future”; its unimaginable scale of destruction, with no decisive victory at the end, then gave the lie to “the Idea of Progress” (21). Fervent adherence to a national cause, belief in the rightness of the cause for which one is fighting, and romantic rhetoric of the “sacrifice,” the gallantry, the rush: this all falls apart during the actual fighting in the trenches with machine guns, mortars, poison gas. The literature that came after the First World War, then, showed a stark tonal, attitudinal departure from the popular Victorian and Edwardian fiction that preceded it, with its celebration of war’s romance and chivalry, that the British and American soldiers grew up reading. Perhaps Fussell’s causation is a bit too simplistic here, but the dominant mode of the high modernist writing of the 1920s is readily characterized by its deflating, cynical irony.

What is striking about the 1930s in intellectual and artistic circles in the U.S. and Britain, by contrast, is the widespread investment in political ideologies. Whereas the serious artist couldn’t be bothered by political causes in the previous decade (with a few notable exceptions, such as John Dos Passos), left-wing ideology and particularly Communism gained fervent adherence among many intellectuals and artists in the 1930s. Where most 1920s artists could never have been persuaded to take up arms in a foreign war for a national cause again, many 1930s writers took up arms voluntarily to fight in a foreign war with what they saw as worldwide ideological implications. In “Inside the
Whale,” Orwell characterizes this shift from the 1920s’ to the 1930s’ writerly ethos in that “[s]uddenly we have got out of the twilight of the gods into a sort of Boy Scout atmosphere of bare knees and community singing”; where “[i]f the keynote of the writers of the twenties is ‘tragic sense of life’, the keynote of the new writers is ‘serious purpose’” (510). The same domestic sentiment that Fitzgerald indicts in *Tender Is the Night* in 1934, Auden employs in rallying to the Spanish Republican flag in “Spain” by 1937. Granted, Fitzgerald and Auden had very different political interests, but such an attitudinal shift was indicative of what a significant number of 1930s writers underwent. Valentine Cunningham claims that an undercurrent of martial sentiment, perhaps squelched by the First World War but not yet vanquished, re-emerged in the Spanish Civil War, which had been “given a kind of proleptic existence in huge tracts of post-WWI writing” (xxv). In the literary, if not actual engagement with the Spanish war among a large group of leftist writers, the 1930s preoccupations with “questions of war, action, pacifism, and the possibility of heroism in the light of the First World War, of Wilfred Owen’s anti-war poetry and the absorbing failure of the ‘self-conscious’ man of action T.E. Lawrence,” and with the renewed ideological fervor of “alertness to issues of class, revolution and the popularity of art, its talk of the revolutionary hour of the knife and the apocalyptic moment of decisive struggle” all came to the fore from 1935 to 1940 (ibid.).

Numerous Cold War-era political analysts, in the period when ideologies had already emerged as major world-shaping forces, figured ideology as the modern, *secular* version of religion that provided all the motive force that religion had in previous eras. Daniel Bell, in *The End of Ideology*, claimed that “the most important, latent, function of
ideology is to tap emotion. Other than religion (and war and nationalism), there have been few forms of channelizing emotional energy. Religion symbolized, drained away, dispersed emotional energy from the world onto the litany, the liturgy, the sacraments, the edifices, the arts. Ideology fuses these energies and channels them into politics” (400). Irving Howe further claimed in his *Politics and the Novel* that ideology “speaks of a society in which men feel themselves becoming functions of large impersonal forces over which they can claim little control. Ideology represents an effort to employ abstract ideas as a means of overcoming the abstractness of social life…. [Ideology] is the passion of men with their backs against the wall” (164).³ For the ideologue, the most just system for organizing society could be installed, and the promises of modernity, heretofore disappointed and deferred, could eventually be fulfilled; the millennium could dawn in America, or Germany, or Russia in a purely secular, political sense. Bell framed twentieth-century ideological fervor in such religious, chiliastic terms, claiming that “What gives ideology its force is its passion…. For the ideologue, truth arises in action, and meaning is given to experience by the ‘transforming moment’. He comes alive not in contemplation, but in ‘the deed’” (400). Thus, the ideologue as Bell figured him is not unlike the “Terrorist” in the nineteenth-century Russian nihilist Stepniak’s appraisal, who “with lofty bearing, and look breathing forth hatred and defiance, made his way through the terrified crowd to enter with firm step upon the scene of history” (qtd. in Houen 56-57), an almost mystical figure also imbued with serious purpose. These notions of utopian futures are sentimental, as can be seen clearly in Auden (whose socialist utopia looks much like that of a nostalgic, pastoral England); thus ideologies have an essential sentimental dynamic—the millennial end that drives the adherents forward. Yet, the
question remains, if political commitments were highly suspect among the vanguard of literary modernists in the 1920s, whose generation had eaten the hard bread and drank the bitter cup of World War I, then how did so many of them become ideologically invested in the 1930s, and what became of this ideological fervor as the “red decade” plunged into the abyss of another devastating war?

To put matters in a broader historical perspective, what was different about the political climate in the 1930s, as opposed to the years before the First World War, was a public awareness of the global ramifications of European and American political entanglements. The worldwide Great Depression of the 1930s had thrown liberal capitalism into fundamental doubt for many, and the contending ideologies of Communism and Fascism—even if they posed even greater dangers—were capturing the world’s attention. Stalin, in perfect clarity now, can be seen as the totalitarian counterpart to Hitler: both can be seen as sociopathic dictators whose own millennial sense of mission, and/or personal pathologies, drove their regimes to commit genocide on an unprecedented scale. Over the past half-century, numerous scholars and politicos have sought to link Fascism and Communism as two sides of the same totalitarian coin. The crucial difference for the far left, though, is that the Communists’ cause, unlike the Fascists’, was essentially just, and was merely hijacked, corrupted, and discredited for others by Stalin. The betrayal by Stalin and the awareness of totalitarianism was a traumatic emotional break for a generation of Western intellectuals of the Old Left, most of who were committed Communists, in the 1930s. However, as a result of these breakthroughs, and the persecution of Reds and former Reds in the late 1940s and early 1950s, many of these former far leftists swung all the way over to the right, never to
return. There are too many complexities in this tale of the decline of the Old Left figures—and the details were certainly different for each individual—to discuss here. But before the Second World War, which in its sheer worldwide scope made every previous war seem puny, the Spanish Civil War was the glorious August of the Old Left. If bureaucratic regimes and reactionary elements in the U.S. and Britain were slowing or thwarting attempts at progressive reform, and if violent protest could not bring about the political change needed, the Spanish Civil War militarized the committed Communist. The war provided an outlet through direct physical action that actually could, it was believed, hasten the establishment of a new democratic, if not Communistic, regime in Spain. And the Fascists they were fighting in Spain were real enemies whom they could kill justly.

In fact, many intellectuals and artists in the 1920s had embraced some form of leftist social radicalism that they bore with them into the 1930s. This radicalism led some to join the Communist Party. Such was the case with John Dos Passos, who wrote his modernist epic, the *U.S.A.* trilogy, in the first half of the 1930s after committing himself through his writing and activism to exposing various forms of social and political oppression in America. Though Dos Passos’ support for Communism waned dramatically in the late 1930s, he had enough interest to go to Spain to work on a Spanish Republican propaganda film, ultimately bankrolled by the Comintern, before making his final break with Communism. Though his case was unique, Dos Passos’ career trajectory, and the blending of his artistic and political interests, aptly dramatizes one particular strain of literary modernism that came of age in the postwar ennui of the 1920s and became fully
invested in leftist politics by the 1930s, right up to the Spanish Civil War. Critic Alfred Kazin, for one, recounts in his 1965 essay “Starting Out in the Thirties”:

> History was going our way, and in our need was the very life-blood of history. Everything in the outside world seemed to be moving toward some final decision, for by now the Spanish Civil War had begun, and every day felt choked with struggle. It was as if the planet had locked in combat. In the same way that unrest and unemployment, the political struggles inside the New Deal, suddenly became a part of the single pattern of struggle in Europe against Franco and his allies Hitler and Mussolini, so I sensed that I could become a writer without giving up my people (qtd. in Carroll and Fernandez 134).

Orwell summed it up that “[n]ot everyone, of course, was definitely in the political racket, but practically everyone was on its periphery and more or less mixed up in propaganda campaigns and squalid controversies” (“Inside” 519).

Auden’s “Spain,” then, is a strikingly comprehensive poetic attempt to capture a sense of the idealism that drove several thousand foreign combatants, including approximately 2,600 Americans, to Spain to contribute to the Republican war effort in the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s. This was the great crusade in the name of a people’s democracy, be it liberal, socialist, or communist, that people needed desperately in the midst of the Great Depression that had laid waste to the American and European economies. For some of those who were old enough to be politically aware during the First World War, the Spanish Civil War gave them the deferred gratification of finally fighting in a war that actually had a clearly defined enemy and a cause worth fighting for (for a time, perhaps, and only to a certain extent). The besieged Spanish Republic, which adopted a program of progressive land-redistribution, and whose government held numerous positions for Communists, was a cause that leftist intellectuals worldwide could rally around. Stalin took an active interest in steering the Spanish Republican government towards Soviet geopolitical aims, and secretly provided arms and numerous
military and governmental advisers who were influential in the Republican government. Franco’s insurgent Fascists, openly aided militarily by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, were the perfect villains that leftists could fight without moral qualms. For many Western liberals throughout the U.S. and Europe, Spain was a cause that cried out to be defended. Here was a Western society under attack from within by a brutish Fascist would-be military dictatorship, supported by big business and the Catholic church, that vowed to preserve the feudalistic economic arrangements that held the peasants in servitude, that supported wealthy landholders and businessmen, and that was actively aided militarily by the other Fascist powers that were already rapidly seizing territory throughout Europe and Africa. An unholy alliance, for certain.

Many of the writers of the time, including some of modernism’s most acclaimed novelists and poets, got caught up in the anti-Fascist fervor and actively promoted the Republican war effort. For example, in 1936, Thomas Mann insisted in his introduction to a pamphlet for the Socialist Alliance of Swiss Women that it is precisely the artist’s duty to publicly address the political events of the day, and to fail to do so is “intellectually and ethically” “ignorant” (qtd. in Miller 65). Mann claimed that the artist who would opt out of these affairs “must be stunted”: “Not only because he sacrifices his existence as an artist, his ‘talent’, and produces nothing more which is available for life,” but also because “even his earlier work, not created under the pressure of such guilt, and once good, will cease to be good and crumble to dust before humanity’s eyes” (ibid.). For Mann, then, the artist’s own political engagement imbues the art he creates with some sort of external, socially determined value integral to its ultimate valuation as art. Mann is hereby rebuking the earlier modernists. Failure to address the Spanish Civil War now will
condemn the artist who shirks his responsibility in the judgment of history. So much is at stake for the artist, then, that it becomes a matter of his “personal salvation,” in Mann’s own words. One of modernism’s greatest novelists had thus become a full-throated ideologue.

What is truly unique about the Spanish Civil War from a literary historical standpoint is the war’s impact upon the imagination of the assortment of major and minor authors of the time, who either flocked to Spain to contribute to the Republican war effort in various ways, or who adamantly supported it in their public discourse from home as Thomas Mann did. No other twentieth-century war would see such an outpouring of active support by a group of artists, which was done voluntarily. Almost unanimously, artists in all media proclaimed their support for the Republican cause.8

Granted, most writers, artists, and intellectuals in the U.S. and U.K. were left-leaning, and many of them were avowed Communists or Socialists. The 1937 British propaganda pamphlet Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War published the written responses of 148 British and expatriate writers. In this pamphlet, published by the British Left Review, it is not surprising to see how unevenly distributed the responses are, but it is striking to see how those who supported the Republic framed their political positions in moral, almost Manichean terms, and as borne out of utmost necessity.9 C. Day Lewis, for example, stated, “I look upon it quite simply as a battle between light and darkness, of which only a blind man could be unaware” (qtd. in Miller 140). He added that “[b]oth as a writer and as a member of the Communist Party I am bound to help in the fight against Fascism, which means certain destruction or living death for humanity” (ibid.).
Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War, I.F. Stone framed his opposition to Fascism in terms more politically coherent but just as dire: “Only the writer who draws his sustenance from the caved-in teat of a decayed past can be a Fascist. Fascism is capitalism seeking by brutality to evade the logic that moves mankind inexorably towards the common-sense solution of the paradox that puts want amid plenty, idle men beside idle factories, underfed children in a land of rotting crops. Fascism, but its very nature, must be anti-rational and anti-humane” (ibid. 146). Stone warned that, “[s]hould the Loyalists lose, we may expect a tidal wave of reaction, obscurantism, race hatred, and thuggery, menacing our own lives and our own homes. We must never forget that the barricades in Madrid are barricades everywhere—in defence of freedom, of culture, and of humanity” (ibid.).

Almost all of these authorial attacks upon Fascism charge that Fascist ideology is retrograde—not a means for social progress but a reversion back to the barbarism of the dark ages. Fascist barbarism was thus figured in terms of their abrogation of democracy, their suppression of free artistic expression, their backing by both obscurantist religion and international capital, and their infliction of civilian atrocities. On this last score, the charges of savagery were abundant. Thomas Mann summed it up: “Spain’s cities are demolished by foreign bombing planes, women and children are butchered; and all this is called a national movement; this villainy crying out to heaven is called God, Order, and Beauty” (qtd. in Miller 66). The Fascists were charged with the mass killings of Spanish civilians by both modern machinery and by their own barbarian hordes—notably the Moroccan mercenaries Franco enlisted, referred to by the cover-all term “Moors.” Thus, in many of the anti-Fascist screeds, there are barely-concealed racist attacks on the
Moors, as well as the Italians and Germans (which one commentator, British literary critic F.L. Lucas, called a union of ancient Caesarism and Nordic barbarianism). What’s new here, though, is the type of the charges of atrocity. The full horrors of mechanized warfare upon people had already been seen two decades earlier in the First World War. But woe be unto those who unleashed it upon the innocent again. As I will discuss in my final section of this chapter, the novel allowed some authors—especially Hemingway—the unique opportunity to address civilian atrocities in comprehensive ways that the political discourse of the time simply could not—when war propaganda was at a pitch never before seen, and stories of Fascist atrocities spread like wildfire.

If the battle-lines were drawn by ideology—Fascism versus Leftism (Republicanism/liberalism/socialism/communism [Stalinist or Trotskyist])—could there be any such delineation between terrorism and honest combat from either side? The charges of civilian atrocity were crucial here, then, for these provided those who supported the Republicans with the moral force, and the secular righteousness, to promote their causes loudly. Atrocity thus became the discursive analogue to “terrorism” that other critics in other times would use for other enemy combatants who slaughter civilians. The very emphasis in both the British and American pamphlets on the notion of the legality of the Spanish Republican government is crucial here—if the besieged Republican government is “legal” because it was duly elected by a mandate of the Spanish people, that can only mean that the Fascists were mounting an illegal rebellion. The casualties inflicted by the Fascists could therefore be seen as acts of terrorism; where the killings for the Republicans were “necessary murders” in Auden’s phrasing, the
killings for the Fascists were “atrocities.” The discursive, rhetorical difference is crucial, and carries all the force of moral condemnation.

The term “cause” was the preferred term for the leftist propagandists. None of these authors, with the notable exception of Raymond Postgate (see note 45), even mentioned the share of killing that the Republicans would have to do. Yet they sanguinely accused the Fascists of doing all the killing of innocent civilians. Therefore, it seemed that Auden overreached in even mentioning the “necessary murder” that would be done in fighting for the Republic. Whether he was extolling the killing (for which Orwell chastised him) or warning that to accept the possibility would be the war’s price of admission, Auden was unique in being one of the only leftist writers who even mentioned the notion of killing by the Republicans.

Granted, there is no room for nuance in the simple, printable responses that the authors were asked to give to the questionnaire that was sent them. They were not being asked to give specifics, nor to propound upon their political beliefs in fully realized essays. However, fiction enables writers to interrogate and critique that which many non-fictive discourses do not. It’s no surprise that the propaganda from the Left presented a biased, simplistic view of the warring sides, but what is surprising is that so many writers, even otherwise incisive, critical ones, got caught up in the propaganda machine, and their writings on the topic show the full sway of ideological fervor. Even some of modernism’s deepest minds like Thomas Mann and Pablo Neruda contributed to the Leftist propaganda. Granted, some of these writers would indeed go on to refute their leftist views, whether communist, socialist, or even liberal by decade’s end and in the two decades that followed. Hemingway was in a unique position to use his fiction on the
Spanish Civil War to interrogate and critique his own and others’ investments in the politics of the war. In this way, as I will show, Hemingway vindicates Auden by showing the mental and emotional toll that killing for the cause takes on fighters on both sides. With his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway blurs the discursive and moral line between terrorism and just cause, which was delineated merely ideologically when both sides were committing atrocities in wartime.


When Thomas Mann, one of the major innovators of modernist literature, wrote propaganda pamphlets for a socialist league, and charged the author who stayed out of the fray with intellectual and ethical “ignorance,” something major had shifted with modernism’s supposed disavowal of politics. Mann’s public stance was characteristic of many literary modernists who sounded off in support of the Republic in the aforementioned pamphlets of British and American writers. This engagement, at least superficially, of authors of all stripes and talents seemed to cover up the widening gap in the literary critical discourse of the time between popular and elite fiction. Certainly there was something odd about Thomas Mann, Ford Madox Ford, and Samuel Beckett even appearing in the same pages, let alone alongside more popular, lesser-esteemed, and now-forgotten authors like Oswell Blakeston, Gerald Bullett, and Lascelles Abercrombie. Granted, the idea was to show a united front among artists everywhere, and to show how few artists actually supported the Fascists or were neutral on the whole matter. Critical distinctions of literary value were of no importance here. Yet something had to have shifted in the stance of the literary modernists to put themselves in this avowedly political
position as artists in the late 1930s. Political engagement is not necessarily anathema to modernism, though, and it’s only the New Critics who made it seem as such.¹³

The 1930s saw the widening gap, opened the decade before, between “popular” novelists and “serious” novelists. Novelists of the 1930s either addressed the political turmoil of their times in their fiction (the “popular” writers), or withdrew from public life altogether and focused on private experience in their fiction (the “serious” ones). This division between high and low culture, the artistic and the popular, was one of the hallmarks of the school of New Criticism, and one of its most lasting legacies. In the postwar era, modernism as a literary style had become institutionalized in intellectual circles, and New Criticism had started to gain currency in colleges throughout the U.S. and Britain, as New Criticism’s study of literary form was the method of study taught increasingly in English departments. Modernism fetishized the written word itself, and the New Critics insisted that literary criticism must shun outside determiners of meaning. The word of the modernist work should not be read solely in any broader social, political context—the word itself was the revolution. Political struggles come and go, but psychological archetypes that tap into fundamental human truths are eternal. The act of writing is politically subversive only in that it carves out a space in which timeless qualities and insights are conveyed, thereby defying the sociopolitical interests of the day.

In 1922, a young Hemingway claimed that “the greatest difficulty [in writing fiction] was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced” which would be “the real thing, this sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion and which would be as valid in a year or ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always” (qtd. in Kenner
123). This desire to capture and harness the transcendent power of words was the driving motivation of modernist poetry as well as fiction. The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art,” T.S. Eliot claimed, was to find the “objective correlative” which he defined as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of the particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately released” (ibid.). Modernist poetry and prose rendered the objective correlative through a “lyric economy” that critic Hugh Kenner claimed is “never eloquent about its real causes” (126); that is, consciously disavowing of its social and political context. Therefore, Kenner claims that texts like Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and Hemingway’s In Our Time operate as a “succession of apparently unrelated fragments” which “appear[] to gather up and symbolize, comprehensively, the times” (151). “Each is autobiographical at bottom,” Kenner claims, “but so indirectly, especially the poem, that the detailed pertinence of the author’s life is apt to surprise us when we finally learn about it” (ibid.). The modernist work cannot then be reduced to a study of its components, but shimmers forth through the power of its words that refer, as efficiently and economically as possible, to the actions represented therein.

For the modernist artist, the work must stand as its own self-validating artifact, and should not be subject to its contemporary contextualization. David Harvey summed up that “Modernist art has always been what Benjamin calls ‘auratic art’, in the sense that the artist had to assume an aura of creativity, of dedication to art for art’s sake, in order to produce a cultural object that would be original, unique, and hence eminently marketable at a monopoly price” (22). The modernist work was not intended to be mass produced
and made massively accessible, as that would adulterate its aura. “The result,” Harvey said, “was often a highly individualistic, aristocratic, disdainful (particularly of popular culture), and even arrogant perspective on the part of cultural producers, but it also indicated how our reality might be constructed and re-constructed through aesthetically informed activity” (ibid.). While anyone may be able to appreciate the modernist work for the underlying, transcendent meaning it conveys, access to such an understanding of that meaning is hardly egalitarian. The observer must be able to understand the artist’s intentions, and in many cases, those meanings were only be shared with and understood by an elite group of other artists and scholars.

In her excellent study *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*, Suzanne Clark delineates the binaries that New Criticism sought to establish through privileging certain contemporary modernist works as worthy of serious literary study, but not others. Moreover, Clark discusses the ways in which the high modernist intellectual movement in literary studies has thus far suppressed the truly politically radical currents promoted by its contemporary writers. Partaking in the New Critical categorizing of “high” and “popular” art, “masculine” and “feminine” writing, this setting of modernist binaries would oppose the political, the ideological, the public, the domestic, the romantic, and the sentimental—all of which are ephemeral and quotidian—to the rarefied, timeless values of the masculine, the private, the mythical, the archetypal, the psychological. Modernism asserts “male independence in the postures of a scientific attitude,” which amounts to a rejection of certain kinds of discourses: “the sentimental because it insists on maternal power, the religious because it encourages weakness and self-abnegation, the romantic when it hysterically embodies the
unconscious rather than sublimating and projecting and objectifying” (30-31). Clark points out that the devalued sentimental position in modernist discourse is that of “a gendered [i.e. feminine] individual, one who would have a heart, who could draw on feelings of sympathy, an individual who could, therefore, make moral judgments grounded in a private realm which oppose the developments of urban industrial society” (20). Yet, the feminine sentimentalist, just like the masculine modernist, is opposed to urban industrial society and the realm of politics, with its own subversive insight rooted in a private, apolitical realm.

Here is the paradox of modernism’s devaluation of the sentimental through its conflation of the sentimental with the political. On the one hand, there is a good, masculine private position based on radical self-reliance and denunciation of the public. On the other hand, there is a bad, feminine private position based on compassion and overabundance of emotion. Both realms of the private are potentially subversive, and politically radical: it is only that the masculine is inward-turned and subversive because it renounces political engagement, and the feminine is outward-turned in that it results in public service. Clark points out that, “The revolution of the word worked by a double movement to both claim and deny the political significance of private experience” (40). However, modernism as formulated by the New Critics privileges the masculine private values of stoicism but degrades the feminine private values of compassion. When emotion is turned outward, it can be readily appropriated; the ideologue is naïve in the extreme, and sentimentally naïve. Political-ideological commitment is a sentimental belief in the rightness of a cause, or a leader, that promises to deliver upon further sentimental goods for the hearth, the homeland, the “just city” in Auden’s “Spain.”
Auden’s enthusiasm reveals precisely the predisposition to giving one’s self over to patriotic and domestic rituals that Dick Diver critiques, which was then readily manipulated for the war effort.

In the traditional, New Critical view, great modernist art would defy politics and the public order through staunch demand for its own self-determined authenticity, and not through any direct engagement or opposition to politics. However, Clark points out that modernism’s origins grew out of early twentieth-century progressive movements whose ideas were integral to the development of twentieth-century ideologies such as socialism, anarchism, and communism, as well as liberalism (32), though modernist claims of the essential, transhistorical, primitive nucleus of the authentic man, however envisioned, were also co-opted by fascism as well. Clark says that “narratives of progress helped to create a revolutionary pressure for change, but they also came to be associated with a sentimental ideal that the reality of industrialization seemed to contradict” (ibid.). The notions of social progress, democracy, and intellectual freedom ring out in the leftist propaganda, and Fascism by contrast is figured as a vague agglomeration of reactionary, retrograde forces that would thwart progress on all these fronts. The notion that Fascist governance is supposed to be inimical to artistic freedom, then, is motivation enough for many of the erstwhile apolitical writers to voice their opposition to it.

Furthermore, modernism and New Criticism are not inured from sentiment themselves though they seek to disavow it, and in fact make very sentimental claims in proclaiming their politics of style. Clark points out that New Critical claims for modernism’s radical rupturing of the world are sentimental in themselves through the crafting of artistic objects impervious to external determiners of meaning (41). Yet this
opposition to public values could only be rendered through a conscious negation of the political situation, and all the popular forms, at hand. The modernist artist must know what he is shutting out in order to actually shut it out in the first place. The very desire to forge something new, while striving for an ultimate value in the words that one writes, thereby forging a new reality sheltered from the political maelstrom outside, is a sentimental claim—a return to the womb perhaps? Or the attainment of some cosmic awareness that makes all of the day’s public strife seem trivial.

In “Inside the Whale,” Orwell famously offers a manifesto for modernism’s need to abstain from direct political engagement in his heralding of Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* as a literary cure for the “awfulness” of the politically charged writing of the 1930s. For Orwell, this “awfulness” is due precisely to the sentimentality of the political, ideological claims, the “Boy Scout” atmosphere of ideologues singing with “serious purpose” (510). From Orwell’s experience, everyone ought to be wary of ideological causes that seek to recruit and indoctrinate them. Whereas leftist writers in Europe and America wore their politics on their sleeve and wrote profoundly inartistic tracts rather than real imaginative works, Miller, in Orwell’s esteem, had succeeded in writing a book that was remarkable in its time precisely through its addressing of hedonistic, private pursuits; the book is for Orwell a throwback to the literary ennui and self-immersion of the 1920s. The time of the release of *Tropic of Cancer*—1934—was perhaps most fortuitous in that this was precisely when the pre-war events in Spain and the rest of Europe were reaching a boiling point, and yet Miller was resolutely focused only on the privations of his narrator and his expatriate companions. Orwell claimed that only fiction like Miller’s, which attempts to plumb the psyche and to find the universal in grossly
personal, even scatological pursuits, can withstand the political proselytizing that Orwell sees so prevalent in other 1930s fiction. This fictive engagement with politics was sentimental and derided by Orwell and Miller; therefore Miller’s writing is the staunchly anti-sentimental remedy here. According to Orwell, Miller, then, is a nihilist who recognized and even celebrated the fact that the world around him was going all to hell—he might as well have a good time regardless. Orwell says that Miller is “fiddling while Rome is burning, and, unlike the enormous majority of people who do this, fiddling with his face towards the flames” (520). Orwell claims that Miller is not ignorant of political realities—he just doesn’t care to address them in his fiction. Yet such political realities form the context—the “whale”—within which Miller’s insular world can be appreciated.14 A return to the womb, then, where the roar of the bombs outside cannot reach the hero embedded within who has renounced all political commitment.

However, in reading even Henry Miller against the grain, his conspicuous ignoring of political events of the day—celebrating bohemian hedonism in interwar Paris amidst the clamor of Fascism next door—constitutes a political statement. In this way, even among the small, select camp of high modernists of the 1920s, when read against the dominant New Critical grain, their works can be appreciated for their latent political content and be seen to offer nuanced critiques of their own contemporary political situations. Clark presents Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* as examples of canonical modernist texts that “work at the borders of identity where the other is not an object but is ambiguously mingled and rejected from the self, where what is evasive is not the object of desire but a desiring subject, and the problem of intersubjective relations is paramount” (31). Hemingway’s
damaged heroes Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* and Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* are damaged in every way—physically, emotionally, psychologically, through injuries sustained during the First World War—and their narratives are those of masculine transference and the evasion of emotional pain; yet their pain is conspicuous, and at times comes rushing through in waves throughout those novels. Insofar as one may sympathize with Barnes and Henry, and identify with their pain that struggles to find an outlet, one may condemn that war and the politics that brought it about in the first place. Clark says that “[n]arration in the twentieth century would become a struggle over how emotion is to be regulated and distributed, where feeling can be allowed” (ibid.). Thus, Hemingway’s brand of modernism, according to Clark, is that where “the pain of these explorations surfaces as the recollection of feeling in style” (139).

Hemingway, then, is a unique type of modernist author who engaged with the Spanish Civil War directly but ambivalently in his fiction in that period of his career. As I will explain further, Hemingway was never a committed Communist, and by all accounts he went to Spain, supported the Spanish Republicans, and contributed to the Popular Front propaganda campaign for personal and professional reasons rather than from any coherent ideological commitment. Though he participated in certain Popular Front activities, notably speaking at the Comintern-backed American Writers Congress in 1937, spearheading the propaganda film *The Spanish Earth*, and befriending numerous Soviet apparatchiks in Spain, Hemingway can best be understood to be political in only a negative capacity. Hemingway was anti-Fascist, rather than pro-Communist, as were many writers who supported the Spanish Republic at the time. Hemingway was never the leftist firebrand that Auden and Orwell once were. His magnum opus of the Spanish Civil
War, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, does not serve as a parting declaration of solidarity for the defeated Republic, nor as a hagiography of the Republicans who fought vainly but valiantly. Rather, Hemingway’s novel serves as a critical study of the mentality of a figure such as Hemingway himself, who in the spirit of the times is led to risk his life and kill for a cause he knows actually little about. It allows Hemingway to question the motives and the evasions and the moral rationalizations that such a figure must constantly make in order to stay true to the mission. Hemingway’s own earlier rejection of political causes is made obvious in *A Farewell to Arms*, where Frederic Henry was “embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain…and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards of Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it” (184). A decade later this has become much more nuanced in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: the latter text combines the modernist rejection of pure political commitment with actual, *willing* political engagement. Hemingway’s politics of style, which, as Clark observes, amounts to the control that Hemingway exerts over the expression of sentiment in his narration of the novel, allows him to interrogate these commitments in fiction. Sentiment in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*—both when it is expressed and when it is conspicuously blocked—are what defy reductionist readings of the book as merely “political,” just as Hemingway’s sentiment defies reductionist readings of him as merely the archetypal stoic, masculinist author of the modernist stamp.

In his 1957 *Politics and the Novel*, Irving Howe offers the simple tautology that a “political novel” is any novel in which we take the political concerns in the text to be crucial to our understanding of that text. By Howe’s logic, then, the most famous novel of
the Spanish Civil War, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, could easily be considered a “political novel” because its manifest content is the war, and the entire text is laden with several characters’ internal commentaries and dialogues on the politics of the war, which in turn influence their inner motives and emotions. However, Howe does not mention *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in his study at all. Instead, Howe critiques one of the classic twentieth-century “political novels” which also happened to come out in 1940, Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, which deals explicitly with Soviet totalitarianism as the dungeon nightmare that has engulfed the apparatchik-turned-heretic Rubashov (just as it did for Koestler in his own Communist service in Spain). The political content is obvious, and Soviet Communism itself serves as the ubiquitous, omniscient, and omnipotent supervillain that Rubashov cannot escape, and which destroys him in the end, of which Stalin (“No. 1” as he is named in the book) is the human form with a smiling face. Koestler’s enemy is monolithic, a veritable force of nature that his protagonist vainly struggles against. Howe’s critical sympathies here are for the political prisoner, caught up in an extreme situation of victimhood within the regime he once served. In this Cold War-era appraisal of *Darkness at Noon*, Howe (a former Marxist of the 1930s) now takes the popular, liberal stance of condemning Stalin, seeing him as the butcher of his own people. Robert Jordan does not face such betrayal and imprisonment by his own side in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, yet he is caught up in a complex political situation in Spain which causes him to wrestle internally with conflicts between his emotional connections with the people he serves alongside and his political commitments to the Republican cause that necessitate him to risk these peoples’ lives and kill others who are indistinguishable from them, except that they ended up in Franco’s army. A reader could
easily see political concerns to be the crucial motive force of many, if not most, of the characters in Hemingway’s novel. So why did Howe not include Hemingway among the small group of “political novelists” he addressed if he included Henry James and Dostoevsky, who wrote only a small portion of works that could be considered expressly “political”? \(^\text{15}\)

Hemingway is the exact contemporary of Koestler and of the other authors of the Spanish Civil War whom Howe critiques such as Orwell and André Malraux. Yet, Hemingway was and still continues to be treated as a canonical modernist author, while Malraux, Koestler, and Orwell are now regarded as niche authors of comparatively minor repute who wrote overtly political novels by Howe’s formula. Hemingway would never go on to write a novel, or even a short story, that specifically tackled an entire political system as its topic as Koestler had just done and as Orwell would do to lasting fame just a few years later with *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Hemingway is unique, then, in that he marked the nexus between the high modernist novelists—those who created and perfected the high modernist style that would be praised by the New Critics for decades to come, and who were ostensibly apolitical—and these (eventually) liberal political novelists of the 1930s and 1940s, if only through his addressing of the Spanish Civil War.

Yet, Hemingway was a notorious self-promoter whose writing career had gone through a long period of relative stasis in the 1930s, when he never produced a work as critically acclaimed as his great novels of the 1920s. \(^\text{16}\) He was largely apolitical until he cast his lot with the Spanish Republicans, which he did, by all accounts, out of his own vaguely defined anti-Fascist views. Where Hemingway once balked at commitment to a
national cause after World War I, the Spanish Civil War gave him a cause to support; it
gave him a sense of political cachet at a time when he feared he was becoming
increasingly irrelevant, out of the game. Hemingway’s erstwhile support for the
Republicans during the war as an American anti-fascist, apolitical and not expressly
ideological, allowed him to critique political commitments from an outsider’s perspective
where once-true believers like Orwell and Koestler arrived at that view only through
experience and betrayal. If *For Whom the Bell Tolls* can be treated as a thoroughgoing
exploration of ideological commitment alongside nonfiction works like Orwell’s *Homage
to Catalonia* and Koestler’s *Spanish Testament*, it is because Hemingway makes his hero,
Robert Jordan, experience the same sorts of ideological negotiations, denials, and
strategic blindesses that actual ideologues like Orwell and Koestler had to experience
firsthand in fighting in the war.

Valentine Cunningham stresses that “[w]riting about the Spanish Civil War
straddled fact and image” (xxviii). Cunningham sees that fiction “always seeps into so-called factual writing. The two discourses are hardly ever completely separable. No effort
at reportage can ever be a mere transcription of the real. And nobody in the 1930s when
documentary techniques and theories in photography, film, and writing were being
invented and developed, ever believed it might be” (ibid.). Orwell’s non-fictive accounts
of his experiences in Spain are laden with impressions that blur the line between fiction
and verifiable fact. Just as sentiment imbues supposed nonfiction writing with an element
of pathos, when it appears in fiction it is given full license to play upon readers’
sympathies for the objects being sentimentalized.
Hemingway, then, practices a politics of literary form in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* which interrogates what it means to commit entirely to a political cause that one suspects is compromised, which causes one to commit morally abhorrent acts, and to reassess the stakes of the fight for the combatants. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* stands out among all novels of the Spanish Civil War as taking the most complete and circumspect view to the whole dramatic tragedy of the war, which most of the authors who voiced their support for the Republic and hatred of Fascism were not able to do. If the Fascists were terroristic in their killing of civilians, Hemingway graphically showed how the Republicans were guilty of the very same atrocities. This was not the same Manichean battle of good against evil that everyone claimed in the propaganda, after all.

3. “So That Everyone Can Eat as Well as the Best”: Anti-Fascism and Political Ambivalence

Pilar: “Are you a Communist?”
Robert Jordan: “No I am an anti-fascist.”
Pilar: “For a long time?”
Robert Jordan: “Since I have understood fascism.” (*For Whom the Bell Tolls* 66)

In his caustic retrospective study of the generation of the 1930s, published years later as the essay collection *Part of Our Time*, Murray Kempton reflects on the “myth of the 1930s”: “No man was an island. He could not escape history. If Madrid fell, he fell with it. In his own time, he would know the night of defeat or the morning of final victory. The instruments of his salvation were his to command” (1). While Kempton’s essays lambaste a small, select contingent of American Communist writers and intellectuals in the 1930s, many of who were invested in various ways in the Spanish Civil War, he does not acknowledge those who partook in the war effort not out of any programmatic,
affirmative political commitments, but out of a negative commitment to opposing Fascism as such. Many of the artists, not to mention most Americans during the 1930s, who supported the Republicans were not Communist at all, but liberals who merely opposed Fascism. This was the case with Hemingway, whose rationale for why anyone should fight as an anti-fascist is summed up by Robert Jordan in For Whom the Bell Tolls in the quote above. Such a staunch stance against a certain side depends on the steadfast view that the other side is wrong, without necessarily requiring positive beliefs that one’s own side is right.

On the one hand, in his 1942 essay “Looking Back on the Spanish War,” Orwell maintains that victories and political agendas in war do matter. As tempting as it might be to condemn both sides for engaging in the same lies, intrigues, and manipulations that make warfare so distasteful in itself, Orwell insists that “in practice…one cannot be neutral, and there is hardly such a thing as a war in which it makes no difference who wins….Nearly always one side stands more or less for progress, the other side more or less for reaction” (261). Orwell saw the Spanish Civil War as different from other wars of nationalist aggression, then, because of its nature as a global “class war”: “If it had been won, the cause of the common people everywhere would have been strengthened”; however, “It was lost, and the dividend-drawers all over the world rubbed their hands. That was the real issue; all else was froth on its surface” (262). This condemnation of the Fascists’ alliance with the reactive forces of international capitalism was right in line with that of many of the other leftist authors of the day. However, Orwell revealingly frames the goods that the Republicans would deliver in the most general terms which it seems any responsible government should bring its people: “All that the working class demands
is what these others would consider the indispensable minimum without which human life cannot be lived at all. Enough to eat, freedom from the haunting terror of unemployment, the knowledge that your children will get a fair chance, a bath once a day, clean linen reasonably often, a roof that doesn’t leak, and short enough working hours to leave you with a little energy when the day is done” (265). Who can argue against the validity of these demands, then, none of which seem particularly revolutionary? Though the full horrors of Fascist oppression had not yet been seen by the rest of the world in 1942, Orwell merely assumes at that point that the Fascists would keep the Spanish workers in perpetual slavery. This is the foregone conclusion that all leftist authors seemed to hold at the time, and if figured that way, everyone ought to be anti-Fascist.

Up to 1936, by all accounts, Hemingway had never taken political action or voiced partisan views of his own. A 1935 letter to Soviet literary critic Ivan Kashkin sums up Hemingway’s apolitical stance succinctly:

I cannot be a Communist now because I believe in only one thing: liberty. First, I would look after myself and do my work. Then I would care for my family. Then I would help my neighbor. But the state I care nothing for. All the state has ever meant to me is unjust taxation. I have never asked anything from it. Maybe you have a better state but I would have to see it to believe it. And I would not know then because I do not speak Russian. I believe in the absolute minimum of government. (qtd. in Baker[b] 419)

Furthermore, Hemingway wrote in that letter: “a writer is like a Gypsy. He owes no allegiance to any government. If he is a good writer he will never like the government he lives under. His hand should be against it and its hand will always be against him. The minute anyone knows any bureaucracy well enough he will hate it. Because the minute it passes a certain size it must be unjust” (ibid.). Hemingway went on to state his manifesto
for good fiction’s apolitical mission, where a writer “can be class-conscious only if his
talent is limited. If he has enough talent, all classes are his province. He takes from them
all and what he gives is everybody’s property….A true work of art endures forever; no
matter what its politics” (ibid.). Yet, if prodded to take sides, Hemingway claimed that
the political left supports the interests of writers much better than the right. Hemingway
addressed the Comintern-supported American Writers Congress in New York City in
1937 with his keynote statement that “[r]eally good writers are always rewarded under
almost any existing system of government that they can tolerate. There is only one form
of government that cannot produce good writers, and that system is fascism. For fascism
is a lie told by bullies. A writer who will not lie cannot live or work under fascism” (qtd.
in Baker[a] 314). This is the precise viewpoint given by many of the writers in the
Authors Take Sides pamphlet: Fascism means death for the creative spirit and the
advancement of human culture. Thus modernist writers did have a stake in the political
battles of the time, if only to preserve their right to create art that defied the political
order of the day.

As he became intrigued by the events of the Spanish Civil War, however, and was
commissioned to report on the war as a correspondent for the North American
Newspaper Alliance, Hemingway claimed in a vague sense to have always sided with the
oppressed peoples of the earth, which is why he was taking the trendy and
uncontroversial path of siding with the Spanish Republicans. Hemingway revealingly
couched these sympathies in terms of class and material wealth; in one letter he wrote
before leaving for Spain in 1936, he claimed “my sympathies are always for exploited
working people against absentee landlords” (qtd. in Cooper 83), an uncontroversial
statement that rings somewhat hollow. By 1936 Hemingway had never supported a social cause through his own writings or activities, and it takes no great risk to say that one supports “exploited working people.” Hemingway wrote to his wife Pauline Pfeiffer’s family before leaving for Spain in 1936 that “the Reds may be as bad as they say but they are the people of the country versus the absentee landlords, the moors, the italians [sic] and the Germans. I know the Whites are rotten because I know them very well and I would like to have a look at the others to see how it lines up on a basis of humanity” (qtd. in Baker[b] 458). Furthermore, in his preface to a collection of Luis Quintanilla’s war drawings, Hemingway wrote that “this war in Spain is not being fought so that everyone will be reduced to a level of blockade rations but so that everyone can eat as well as the best” (qtd. in Cooper 84). This compassionate stance towards oppressed laborers seems to be a marked shift from Hemingway’s stoic fatalism in *A Farewell to Arms*, where the world “kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially” (249). In Hemingway’s new public outlook, then, the world’s poor are worthy of his sympathy, though his concern for protecting them from unjust taxation is right in line with his own visceral disdain for the U.S. government’s taxing him, the unsophisticated claim he made in his letter to Kashkin a year earlier. This notion of “humanity” is crucial to Hemingway’s sympathetic investment in the Republicans, and which he problematizes in dramatic fashion in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

In his fiction, then, certain of Hemingway’s characters offer even more vacuous proclamations for the righteousness of the Republican cause. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Robert Jordan reflects that the reason why he, an American, is fighting for the Spanish Republic is simply because the war had “started in a country that he loved and he
believed in the Republic and that if it were destroyed life would be unbearable for all those people who believed in it” (163). Jordan’s statement is sentimentally charged, and almost willfully myopic. Jordan merely thinks that “he believed in the Republic,” which is a loyalty on the order of religious faith. Moreover, he cannot describe how life in Spain under the Fascists would be “unbearable” and his direct experiences provide no account of actual Fascist atrocities. In the context of the Authors Take Sides viewpoints, most of which make bold and unspecific claims to the unthinkable oppression that would occur under Fascism, Robert Jordan’s anti-fascist ideas are precisely in line with those of Hemingway’s contemporaries.

Hemingway wrote a few stories about the Spanish Civil War that were of dubious quality, in league with the propaganda pieces of his newspaper reporting and his screenplay writing for the propaganda film The Spanish Earth, co-written with John Dos Passos.18 Hemingway’s short story “Nobody Ever Dies,” which he wrote at the disastrous end of the civil war amidst the Republicans’ defeat in 1939, seems to offer heartfelt condolence for the revolutionaries. The story’s hero Enrique is unwavering in his commitment to the Republic, unlike Hemingway’s earlier young male protagonists whose commitments to other causes he douses with caustic irony. Maria, Enrique’s girlfriend, becomes convinced of the truth of Enrique’s revolutionary rhetoric once he dies, empowered by her realization that “no one dies for nothing.” The story ends with her being arrested by fascist police, emboldened by a newfound ideological fervor in which Hemingway likens her to Joan of Arc. This may have been a throwaway story of Hemingway’s which he wrote for Cosmopolitan on short order, much as he did his war dispatches that painted explicitly favorable sketches of the Republican war effort.
However, where at least one critic, Stephen Cooper in *The Politics of Ernest Hemingway*, sees this as an uncharacteristic, unironic affirmation of revolutionary politics for Hemingway, this story may also be seen as highly ironic, a tongue-in-cheek parody of revolutionary sentiment that Hemingway once mimicked but could never fully embrace.

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Jordan recalls his initial reverence for the Communist ideals in terms of religious conversion. Though Jordan feels the “embarrassment” of describing his war activities in terms of a “crusade” in the modestly cynical way that Frederic Henry does in *A Farewell to Arms*, he reflects that his service to the Communist cause, at first, was “a feeling of consecration to a duty toward all of the oppressed of the world which would be as difficult and embarrassing to speak about as religious experience and yet it was authentic as the feeling you had when you heard Bach, or stood in Chartres Cathedral or the Cathedral at Leon and saw the light coming through the great windows; or when you saw Mantegna and Greco and Brueghel at the Prado” (235).

However, Jordan at first only allied himself with the Communists as a matter of respect for the discipline and backbone they provide to the mission. Jordan thinks that “[h]ere in Spain the Communists offered the best discipline and the soundest and sanest for the prosecution of the war. He accepted their discipline for the duration of the war because, in the conduct of the war, they were the only party whose program and whose discipline he could respect.”

Jordan knows he does not believe in the tenets of Marxism, though, and of anything is guided by the liberal values championed in the French and American Revolutions: “You’re not a real Marxist and you know it. You believe in Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. You believe in Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. Don’t ever kid yourself with too much dialectics. They are for some but not for you” (305).
European Marxism is too exotic a doctrine for Jordan to ever fully embrace, and his political commitments are couched in recognizably American liberal tenets, which he can then apply to his notions of justice for the Spanish people.

Rather than sound his earlier paean to Soviet Marxism throughout, Jordan wrestles with it throughout the novel. His own torment has all the features of the existential struggles that are borne out in many of Hemingway’s other works. Yet, unlike the intensely personal nature of the inner pain of Nick Adams or Jake Barnes, Robert Jordan’s inner anguish in the Spanish Civil War has its definite, identifiable political determinants. In this sense, For Whom the Bell Tolls is unusual for Hemingway, and unusual among other fictive treatments of the Spanish war, in that these existential struggles, which are the hallmark of Hemingway’s brand of modernism, are used to unsettle and interrogate the specific political aspects of a world-historical event. Hemingway’s politics of style are intensely politically subversive in this case.

Hemingway had become fully aware of the corruption inherent in the war effort by the time he wrote his novel, especially on the part of the Soviets. While in Spain, Hemingway notoriously enjoyed the hospitality of some of the most senior of the Soviet propagandists, some of whom he continued to profess his admiration for in For Whom the Bell Tolls such as Mikhail Koltsov, an undersecretary for Soviet propaganda whom Hemingway rendered in the novel as Karkov, an intelligent, sensitive, and essentially decent man. However, while he enjoyed being treated lavishly, the opulence of the Soviets’ accommodations in Madrid aroused Hemingway’s suspicion. In the novel, the dross of Gaylord’s hotel, which served as the Soviet command headquarters in Madrid, strikes Jordan as seeming “indecently luxurious and corrupt”; but he wryly rationalizes
“why shouldn’t the representatives of a power that governed a sixth of the world have a few comforts?” (231). The cracks in the Soviets’ façade of promoting the proletarian revolution in Spain show all throughout the novel. In a 1937 letter to writer Harry Sylvester, Hemingway wrote of his allegiances in Spain that “my sympathies are always for the exploited working people against the absentee landlords even if I drink around with the landlords and shoot pigeons with them. I would as soon shoot them as the pigeons” (qtd. in Baker[b] 456).

In this letter, he lambastes the Soviets: “I think that’s a dirty outfit in Russia now but I don’t like any governments” (457), and, indeed, Hemingway verifiably had insider’s knowledge into at least one political murder committed by the Soviet command in Spain. At least once in his actual experience in Spain, Hemingway himself was compelled to not only accept, but remain complicit in the fact that one of his acquaintances, and one of Dos Passos’ close friends, had in fact been killed by the Comintern. José Robles was a Spanish national who had risen high in the ranks of the Spanish Republican government, and was a longstanding friend of Dos Passos. In 1937, Robles was captured by Soviet military police and eventually executed, supposedly on suspicion of being a Fascist spy. It is more likely, though, that Robles was “liquidated” in the Soviet style as Stalin was enacting his purges of his potential political enemies in Russia and abroad. Hemingway had learned about Robles’ death from the American writer Josephine Herbst, who had access to the Comintern in Spain. Dos Passos had agreed to come to Spain to work with Hemingway on The Spanish Earth, but immediately started inquiring into the fate of Robles. Hemingway urged that Dos Passos stop asking questions, that people disappear all the time during a war, and that Dos Passos steel himself for the challenge. Hemingway
remained evasive about what exactly he knew, and but eventually told Dos Passos that Robles had been killed as a Fascist spy.\textsuperscript{21} The incident destroyed the friendship between Hemingway and Dos Passos from that point on, though the film did get made, with Hemingway providing all of the narration and publicity work for it.\textsuperscript{22} This episode proved that Hemingway was indeed up to the task, at least in the line he took in public, of Auden’s “necessary murder” in service to the cause, though Hemingway was apparently blind to the real machinations of the Soviets at the time that Robles’s killing took place.\textsuperscript{23}

Written two years after the incident, then, \textit{For Whom the Bell Tolls} is filled with moments of Robert Jordan’s ideological catechizing and moral equivocating, which indicate that Hemingway understood how such constant revisions and justifications must work. Jordan must curtail or delay his own reflections upon the violence he commits for some future time of tranquility—as Auden’s poem “Spain” would suggest for the fighter—because such questions would only interfere with his performance of his wartime duties. In one of the many moments in which Jordan is left only to his thoughts while he is waiting for action to occur, he shepherds his thoughts so that “[h]e would not think himself into any defeatism”; “[t]he first thing was to win the war. If we did not win the war everything was lost” (136). Jordan was “serving in a war and he gave absolute loyalty and as complete a performance as he could while he was serving. But nobody owned his mind, nor his faculties for seeing and hearing, and if he were going to form judgments he would form them afterwards” (ibid.). Later, Jordan thinks “You have to put many things in abeyance to win a war. If this war is lost all of those things [life, liberty, pursuit of happiness] are lost….But afterwards you can discard what you do not believe in” (305). It may be specious to claim that Hemingway was referring to the sort of ethical
acrobatics he had to do himself in order to stay true to some sense of mission in Spain, but the novel reveals that he at least acknowledged that others had to perform such acts of equivocation, suppressing the tough moral questions because they only make the task at hand all the more difficult to perform.

Hemingway directly addresses the matter of political terror enacted by the Soviet command by critiquing the rhetorical nature of the different labels affixed to acts of political murder. If Hemingway allied himself, at least nominally, with the Soviets for the respectable discipline they provided in an otherwise chaotic and often ignorantly executed war, he came to loathe the totalitarian control they exerted, which had become all too apparent to thousands of others. In one vivid scene, which is Hemingway’s most direct engagement with Stalinist political tactics and which seems to refer directly to Hemingway’s complicity in the Robles affair, Jordan questions Karkov, the Soviet envoy whom Jordan befriends, on the nature of political murder. When Karkov mentions the recent killing of Calvo Sotelo, a prominent Fascist intellectual, Jordan remarks that he thought the Soviet party line prohibited “political assassination.” Karkov replies “It is practiced very extensively. Very, very extensively,” no doubt showing Hemingway’s understanding of the Soviet purges that had occurred throughout the late 1930s. Karkov then clarifies that “We do not believe in acts of terrorism by individuals….Not of course by criminal terrorist and counter-revolutionary organizations” (245). Karkov then speaks of recently executed prisoners of Stalin’s, who were killed upon being framed as conspirators in the show trials, in that “certainly we execute and destroy such veritable fiends and dregs of humanity and the treacherous dogs of generals and the revolting spectacle of admirals unfaithful to their truths. These are destroyed. They are not
assassinated. You see the difference?” (ibid.). Thus, Karkov labels political enemies of Stalin as “fiends,” “dregs” and “dogs” who can rightly be “destroyed” without qualms because these murders are sanctioned by the Party, unlike illegal acts of terrorist violence. Yet enemies whom one respects, such as Sotelo, can be “assassinated”—a seemingly more dignified means of dispatching political enemies, and a hypocritical distinction which Hemingway found it impossible to ignore at that point.

Jordan’s killing in his military service, and his alliance with those who engage in clandestine murder for reasons he comes to believe are politically and ethically specious, shows the moral tension that is near the heart of the debate over killing for a political cause. Jordan is more akin to Hamlet than Macbeth here, and in his character Hemingway dramatizes the moral consequences of killing, which was unique among the fiction of the Spanish war. Hemingway grapples with the moral dilemma of killing other men, which is a departure for him, and much different from killing animals in the martial dramas of his other stories. Even in his earlier war novel, A Farewell to Arms, Frederic Henry, who is full of ruminations and sorrows of the loss he has suffered in that war, is not shown to agonize over the killing of enemy combatants. In taking up Clark’s claim that Hemingway’s writing advances a politics of style, in which emotion is carefully and strategically regulated and released, Jordan’s ruminations over the killing he does imbues For Whom the Bell Tolls with a pervasive sense of pathos all throughout.

For comparison, in his wartime memoir Homage to Catalonia, Orwell tells how he reached an epiphany on the battle line where he realized that the Fascists were just ordinary people like him with their own human foibles. While on patrol one morning, Orwell spots a Fascist guard in his rifle sights. When an alarm sounds, the guard, who
Orwell realizes had been busy urinating at that exact moment, struggles to pull up his pants while running back to his station. Orwell takes pity on the man and does not shoot, because, as he says, he “had come here to shoot at ‘Fascists’; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn’t a ‘Fascist’, he is visibly a fellow creature, similar to yourself, and you don’t feel like shooting at him” (254). In her States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel, Elizabeth Barnes cites Adam Smith’s notion in his Theory of Moral Sentiments that the bedrock of harmonious human relations is “fellow feeling”: “the projection of our feelings outward, but outward only onto those subjects who, by virtue of their likeness to us, inspire us to put ourselves in their place” (130). As I state in the Introduction, sympathy as Smith conceives it can be seen as the action wing of sentiment: sympathy can be socially and ethically consequential when it compels the sympathizer to take action to ease the Other’s suffering, or to prevent the suffering altogether. From Orwell’s account, this is very much the operation of sympathy that inspired him not to shoot this “fellow creature” who behaved so very much like himself, on the Fascist lines. Orwell’s sympathy, then, restores a temporary balance of “harmonious human relations” in the very midst of an intensely partisan war that drew literal sides among peoples no different from each other in their vital human functions. Thus, as Orwell seems to suggest, sympathy transcends ideology and points to a greater human community than that which is delineated within party lines.

For Whom the Bell Tolls is full of such expressions of sympathy and reluctance to kill the people who are being sympathized with. Jordan’s rebel companion Anselmo, who expresses at least as many qualms about killing as Jordan does, thinks to himself, “The fascists are warm…and they are comfortable, and tomorrow night we will kill them….I
have watched them all day and they are the same men that we are. I believe that I could walk up to the mill and knock on the door and I would be welcome except that they have orders to challenge all travelers and ask to see their papers. It is only papers that come between us. Those men are not fascists. I call them so, but they are not. They are poor men as we are” (192-93). Anselmo’s thoughts are constantly tormented by the guilt of murder, which he still figures must be “a really great sin” (198). Though he has killed men that were called “fascist” before and was prepared to do so again, Anselmo must force himself to override the guilt over the sin of murder each time he pulls the trigger. Jordan himself, who must rationalize each murder he commits in the war as the necessary means to some idealized end, comes to a similar realization when he shoots a young Fascist cavalryman and sorts through his personal affects. Upon reading the letters that the boy kept in his knapsack, Jordan realizes that the boy came from a poor family in Navarre, whose people Jordan idealizes as the salt of the earth, the most virtuous people in all of Spain. The boy had only ended up on the Fascist side because his family supported the deposed king, and had probably been royalists for centuries. It was only cruel fate that brought the boy to discover the rebels’ camp, which required Jordan to shoot him.

It is worth contrasting *For Whom the Bell Tolls* with another celebrated example of war fiction from that period, André Malraux’s *Man’s Fate*. This novel, published in 1934, is generally considered Malraux’s one and only masterpiece, which dramatizes the events that occurred during the failed 1927 Communist revolt in Shanghai. Malraux’s heroes here are the Communist operatives who engage in clandestine revolutionary plots against Chiang Kai-Shek. Malraux paints memorable portraits of two of the
revolutionaries. First there is Ch’en, who ecstatically ventures down the dark path of “terrorism” once he commits his first assassination. Then there is Kyo, who is drawn to Communism out of the social vision it provides for alleviating poverty and famine for the Chinese peasants. Kyo is the good party soldier (“His life had a meaning, and he knew what it was: to give to each of these men whom famine, at this very moment, was killing off like a slow plague, the sense of his own dignity” [64]) who takes up arms reluctantly, and only when directed by his commanders, whereas Ch’en leaps into the moral abyss, killing for killing’s own sake, never to rejoin the society of his party. The two characters show two possible directions that the political agent may take in violently serving a cause. Ch’en, however, joins the cause to redress the poverty that had destroyed his family, whereas Kyo, whose father was an academic, comes to the cause as a scholar at first, before he became emotionally invested in the revolution. While Malraux sets up Ch’en as a negative example of the dangers of visceral, undirected violence that exceeds any political purpose, Kyo is Malraux’s unquestioned hero who never waives in his political commitment, though it brings about his inevitable doom. For Malraux, violence is redeemed only through its political use-value. If murder is committed for private thrill, it is a horror greatly to be feared. One may rest easy, though, when one kills for the cause if one is directed to do so. Even though Malraux moved increasingly rightward throughout his career, he supported the Republicans in exactly this way, praising those who sacrificed their lives for la causa in his 1938 Spanish Civil War novel, Man’s Hope (which is the only other novel of the war published that rivals For Whom the Bell Tolls in sheer scope and length, though, as I will show in the final section, not in depth).
Hemingway, by contrast, problematizes precisely this matter of killing for the cause, and his characters find no easy relief in doing so. James L. Kastely says that throughout the history of the criticism of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the majority of critics focus on either the ethical or the political dimension of the novel. Thus, Kastely draws attention to the narrative form of the novel itself, which dramatizes the conflict between political duty and ethical responsibility. In his many moments of private reflection, Jordan cannot squelch his conscience altogether. In his private reverie, Jordan “noticed, and listened to, and remembered everything” he did in Spain and realizes that the judgments he must delay would have “plenty of material to draw them from. There was plenty already. There was a little too much sometimes” (136). Jordan’s self-catechizing reaches its apogee in mental battles such as this: “Do you think you have the right to kill any one? No. But I have to. How many of those you have killed have been real fascists? Very few. But they are all the enemy to whose force we are opposing force. But you like the people of Navarra better than those of any other part of Spain? Yes. And you kill them. Yes….And you still believe absolutely that your cause is right? Yes” (303-304). Jordan does not kill non-combatants, though he sees some of the Fascist combatants up close and realizes that they’re no different from his own comrades, except that they ended up on the other side of the lines. He realizes these are not all the terrorists or barbarians they are purported to be. In this sense, as a foreign volunteer fighting in a war in which the lines of right and wrong were becoming increasingly blurred, he struggled to reconcile the violence he commits. And much to his dismay, there is no solace in the fact that he is being ordered to kill by the Russians who are not noble and just in any clearly definable way, and might actually be the “dirty outfit” Hemingway claims they are.
Hemingway’s novel-length exploration of the moral complexities and nuances of the conflict between personal morality and political commitment show that Hemingway did not uncritically toe the party line, nor uncritically praise the Republicans. Even when he capitulated to the acceptance of political murder by the side he was supporting in actual events, he used Jordan as a register for the moral ambivalence one may feel about such acts, and the difficult and tenuous business of moral equivocation that the acceptance of the “necessary murder” requires. This operation is precisely what separates Hemingway’s novel from other war novels of the time such as Malraux’s *Man’s Fate* or *Man’s Hope*. Ambivalence and equivocation are touchstones for modernist fiction, and serve as the antidote to Orwell’s derided ideological fiction, which would unquestioningly champion one’s ideological cause while maintaining a willful blindness to the necessary murders that one’s own cause commits in the war.

4. Atrocity, Storytelling, and Being Made to See

I’ve always known it and hated it and I have heard it mentioned shamelessly and shamefully, bragged of, boasted of, defended, explained and denied. But that damned woman made me see it as though I had been there. (*For Whom the Bell Tolls* 135)

In Malraux’s 1937 essay “Forging Man’s Fate in Spain,” he offers a journalistically rendered account of a Christmastime wartime relief event in Madrid. Children gathered in a bullring on January 1 to gather up thousands of toys donated by people from all over the world who sympathized with the Republic. The toys were arranged in piles, “each like a tangled mass of insects.” While the children were sorting among the toys, there was a short and sudden bombing nearby by German planes, during which some of the bombs fell just six hundred meters away. After the raid was over, the children came back to the
ring to scavenge among the remaining piles of toys, at which point Malraux was shocked by what he then witnessed.

There remained in the immense empty space one little heap, untouched. I approached to examine it; it was a pile of toy airplanes. It lay where any child could have helped himself. The little boys had preferred anything, even dolls, and had kept away from that pile of toy airplanes, not with fear, but with a sort of mysterious horror. That scene stayed in my memory. We and the Fascists are forever separated by that little heap of abandoned playthings. (qtd. in Benson 232)

This is a common technique in war writing of course: drawing a clear moral line between one’s own side and the enemy. Only the Fascists would be so barbaric as to bomb innocent children; the Republicans would never do that. Malraux appeals to readerly sympathies, though, precisely through his incorporation of children into the anecdote. Not only do the Fascists kill little children; they also irreparably traumatize the ones who survive. This is a compelling ploy for certain, and one is struck by the incongruity here: we give children toys; they kill children and their parents. Here is a whole generation of damaged children who will never be able to stand the sight of a plane again (an unfortunate case for Malraux, who helped marshal the makeshift Republican air force where he was named “squadron leader”).

Malraux could have stopped short of the political line-drawing between Republican and Fascist morality here if he were telling a mere story. He could have ended the story with his observation that the children had steered clear of the pile of toy airplanes, and the reader would be left to contemplate the horrors of war alone, without being directed to think about the differences between the two warring sides. However, Malraux made the story an indictment of the Fascists in the context of civilian atrocities, which is always bound to provoke a visceral reaction among readers. Malraux is making an appeal to the sentiments of the readers for the innocent, helpless victims here, and
eliciting outrage against the Fascists because of the children they kill and traumatize. Stirring up a visceral reaction among readers can be the aim of anyone who uses sentiment for the classes of people and objects deemed innocent. The fascination or repulsion one feels for the spectacle of gratuitous violence conveyed may override the need to analyze the situation in all its complexity.

Many forms of civilian atrocities were reported to have occurred during the Spanish Civil War. Such atrocities have always occurred during wars, but in this case they were broadcast to a fascinated worldwide audience who soaked in such news with almost perverse eagerness. Such sensationalized charges of atrocities concerning acts of religious desecration, sexual perversion, and cannibalism were made by both sides, much as had been done in the Russian Civil War of 1917-21. The widespread aerial bombardment of civilian peoples, though, was something that had not been seen before to such an extent, in Fascist efforts to terrorize the people and pacify the occupied areas. Indeed one of the most famous artistic pieces created in the Spanish Civil War was Picasso’s *Guernica*, which was first unveiled to the public at the Paris International Exhibition in 1937 in a propagandistic bid to drum up foreign support for the Republican cause. While the massive carnage of the First World War was something barely comprehensible for the crowds back home, the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War were something that the audiences were prepared both to voyeuristically relish and to proclaim their righteous outrage over. Sentiment fosters such righteous outrage when deployed in situations where the deaths of children occur. The Spanish Civil War reporting was punctuated by lurid newspaper accusations of physical atrocities committed by both sides, particularly decapitations and rapes of all sorts. Some of the most popular were
stories about the rape of naked nuns by the Reds, and the slaughter of young children by
the Whites, the corpses of which they were said to use to construct barricades (on this,
Orwell drolly commented that this would be “a most unhandy thing to make barricades
with” [qtd. in Benson 224]). This is bad sentiment at its most vicious and gratuitous.

The Fascist insurgency was technically outside the bounds of legality at the time
since they opposed the legally elected Republic. Thus, in anti-Fascist discourse, the
Fascists could be considered terroristic because they waged illegal combat and murdered
innocent civilians in the process. In contrast to Malraux’s propagandizing, then, Orwell
takes a critical view of propaganda in “Looking Back on the Spanish War.” One of the
major lessons that Orwell had taken away from the Spanish Civil War was firsthand
knowledge of the way partisan propaganda works, which was to fuel his famous anti-
totalitarian fiction in the 1940s. “Everyone believes in the atrocities of the enemy and
disbelieves in those of his own side, without ever bothering to examine the evidence”
(252). Orwell claims to have drawn up a “table of atrocities” that had occurred between
1918 and 1942 and found that “there was hardly a single case when the Left and the
Right believed in the same stories simultaneously” and that “at any moment the situation
can suddenly reverse itself and yesterday’s proved-to-the-hilt atrocity story can become a
ridiculous lie, merely because the political landscape has changed” (252). Revealingly,
though, Orwell still claims in retrospect that the majority of the war’s atrocities were in
fact committed by the Fascists rather than the Republicans: “although it has ceased to be
fashionable to say so, there is little question that what one may roughly call the ‘whites’
commit far more and worse atrocities than the ‘reds’” (253). Thus, just as the
Republicans stood for progress and human decency and the Fascists reaction, the Fascist Whites surpassed the Reds in the number and kind of atrocities they committed.

In his war reporting, Hemingway followed suit with most other writers on the war and spared no chance to recount the destruction upon the civilian population wreaked by the Fascists. In a 1937 letter to Harry Sylvester, Hemingway wrote of the Fascists that “the rebels have plenty of good Italian ambulances. But it’s not very catholic or christian to kill the wounded in the hospital in Toledo with handgrenades or to bomb the working quarter of Madrid for no military reason except to kill poor people; whose politics are only the politics of desperation” (qtd. in Baker[b] 456). However, Hemingway blamed both sides and took refuge in his apolitical, humanitarian stance that “the Spanish war is a bad war…and nobody is right. All I care about is human beings and alleviateing [sic] their suffering which is why I back ambulances and hospitals” (ibid.).

For many on the left, such sensational murders of the innocent wounded is explainable as the terroristic violence that comes naturally for the Fascists. However, the most horrific violence that occurs in For Whom the Bell Tolls is during an uprising in a small town, in which the townspeople are incited to kill some of their own in a grotesque civic ritual. The atrocity—and indeed it does become a full-fledged atrocity that Hemingway describes in disturbing and relentless detail—is brought on not by the Fascists but by the Republicans, and it is told as a narrated story by one of the Republican rebels. Pilar, the earthy, battle-hardened matron of the group, narrates for Jordan the tale of the capture of the town and purging of the fascists in it by Pablo, her partner and de facto leader of the rebel band that Jordan joins. Pablo rounds up the town’s reputed fascists and forces the townspeople to form a gamut, through which the condemned
would be led one-by-one as their neighbors would bludgeon and hack them to death with farm tools before throwing their corpses off the cliff at the end of the line. After extreme reluctance and with the aid of alcohol and verbal provocation, the townspeople eventually degenerate from frightened and sickened neighbors to an enraged, bloodthirsty mob, more than willing to commit the atrocities that Pablo wishes, to the point of slaughtering the priest.

Hemingway doubtless gained the ideas for such atrocities from the war reporting he had read, as well as the war reporting he had done himself during both the Greco-Turkish War of the early 1920s and the Spanish Civil War, which often took liberties with the extent of the violence reported. However, what is notable here is that these atrocities are committed in the novel by the Republicans rather than the Fascists. Hemingway allows Pilar to present the story in steady, realistic detail that does not devolve into sensational renderings of the violence, as gruesome as it is. The Fascist atrocities, by contrast, are only mentioned in passing or occluded altogether in the narrative, and Pilar says that the worst day of her life was three days after the massacre, when the Fascists retook the town. The atrocities committed by her comrades made for only the second-worst day of her life, so the reader is left only to imagine what even greater horrors the Fascists committed, and Jordan must be satisfied that she will tell that tale “someday.” The story of the Fascist atrocities never comes in the novel, though, and we are left with a stark account of the horrific violence committed at the service of the Republic, which disturbs any notion that the Republicans were unequivocally innocent in the war. Just as Conrad claimed in his essay “Autocracy and War” that war reporting that conveys vivid images of suffering is much more impactful than war reporting that cites
only statistics of casualties, Hemingway relies on Pilar’s storytelling to express the underlying horror of the war in a way that Orwell’s “table of atrocities” could not.

What is Hemingway doing here, then, in showing in vivid detail the atrocities that his own side is committing? He obviously isn’t appealing for sympathy to the Fascist side itself. If he isn’t condemning the Republic, then, is he condemning war altogether? A revealing clue comes in a 1939 letter he wrote to Ivan Kashkin. In the aftermath of the war, as he was hard at work in the writing of For Whom the Bell Tolls, Hemingway wrote that “[i]n stories about the war I try to show all the different sides of it, taking it slowly and honestly and examining it from many ways. So never think one story represents my viewpoint because it is way too complicated for that” (qtd. in Baker[b] 480). James L. Kastely rightly claims that Pilar’s account of the atrocity as a grossly realistic story is a crucial development in Jordan’s political education in the novel (196). The importance of Pilar’s account, then, lies in the fact that it does not provide a simplistic rendering of good and evil characters, but rather reveals “the vividness and complexity of the individual actors who were involved, so that it becomes an origin for Jordan’s questioning his own actions” (197). Whereas Jordan had been figuring the war in abstractions, telling himself he was justly killing for a cause he loves, Pilar’s narrative introduces to him the notion of individual responsibility for the murders one commits. If the Republicans did end up winning the war, hers would be a counter-history, a story that would never be told, and was certainly not being told then by the pro-Republican reporting that only told of the atrocities committed by the Fascists. Importantly, then, Kastely claims that Pilar does not urge Jordan to see the war as a matter of individual morality that should transcend the political dimension, but rather helps him gain a
“double perspective” that allows him to see the broader struggle and its impact on the lives of those involved. Storytelling is thus the most accurate account of the atrocity of one’s own side, and Hemingway’s fiction thus goes further in exposing the horrors of war—in this case those committed by the Reds—than most non-fictional accounts can.\(^{28}\)

What Pilar provides Jordan, then, is a narrative version of events that enables him to sympathize with the sufferers, who suffer excruciatingly even though they are “fascists.” In *States of Sympathy*, Elizabeth Barnes upholds Adam Smith’s claim that the act of “reading,” specifically, of being presented with a fictionalized rendition of a person, enables sympathetic identification to take place, where our imaginations allow us to “become the very person whose actions are represented to us” (22). This empathetic identification with the sufferer is the fundamental operation of both Rousseau’s and Smith’s sentimental contract. Smith said that it is “the object of scrutiny who must elicit sympathy from the viewer” (ibid.), and this is done most readily through the experience of the object’s suffering, to which the viewer responds viscerally. Thus, “only when another’s ‘agonies’ are ‘brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own’, do they ‘begin at last to affect us’” (21-22). Thus, Pilar’s narrative of human suffering, in this case brought on by Jordan’s own comrades, radically subverts the official news of the war that Jordan consumes every day. Jordan, awestruck, reflects,

You only heard the statement of the loss. You did not see the father fall as Pilar made him see the fascists die in that story she had told by the stream. You knew the father died in some courtyard, or against some wall, or in some field or orchard, or at night, in the lights of a truck, beside some road. You had seen the lights of the car from the hills and heard the shooting and afterwards you had come down to the road and found the bodies. You did not see the mother shot, nor the sister, nor the brother. You heard about it; you heard the shots; and you saw the bodies. (135)
In Jordan’s inner monologue here, his repeated use of “you” refers to himself as the one who experienced everything he mentions. However, this hypothetical second person that’s being addressed functions as a proxy for Hemingway’s intended reader, the one whom he means to feel all of those sensations. Hemingway, in effect, is interpellating the reader as a feeling subject who is capable of feeling the sympathy that Jordan feels. Pilar’s act of storytelling has ramifications, then, that defy the political abstractions of the war, in that her reckoning of the violence she has taken part in shakes Jordan to his foundations for the rest of his mission. “That damned woman made me see it as though I had been there,” he gasps to himself (ibid.).

It is worth questioning, then, what it means here when the horrific narrative of a massacre of innocent neighbors (a sentimental dynamic at its most excruciating) is told by a female narrator, traditionally figured as sentimental in the New Critical order but who is described as ugly, earthy, and masculine. Does Pilar’s role as storyteller rescue the tale from what might otherwise seem sentimental banality to Hemingway’s readers? Would the story convey the same impact if Maria, the suffering rape victim and love-object of Jordan’s told it somehow? Pilar’s unwavering insight and brutal detail compel us to take the story seriously, to be moved by it and disturbed emotionally, while it still retains its political urgency. However, the story only seems to retain its authority, and its verifiable facticity for Jordan, because it is told by an extraordinarily tough-minded and masculine woman who fights alongside the men. Ironically, in a metacritical sense, Pilar ends up playing the role that Hemingway himself does in writing the novel, and telling the story through the novel. Pilar’s pontificating allows Hemingway to deliver a sermon in its full moral import that he would not do directly through his narrative voice.
Where Hemingway would never address the reader directly and urge the reader to feel the full moral outrage he might intend—as an author like Harriet Beecher Stowe does explicitly in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—he uses Pilar to agitate for such a reaction where he cannot.

What sense, then, can be made of Maria’s suffering in the novel, as she is the one character revealed to have actually suffered at the hands of the Fascists? Jordan learns early on that Maria was gang-raped by fascist Moors, who also shaved her head, an incident to which she and Pilar allude several times throughout the novel. He gets the definite sense that Maria is traumatized by these events, but he only realizes this in the abstract and cannot consciously come to grips with it—only that he must be gentle with her when he first beds her. Jordan thinks of Pilar, then, as Maria’s “psychiatrist” who is able to judge that Maria is “sound enough now” (137). Whenever Maria alludes to her rape, Pilar chastises her for mentioning it, that it is “not healthy.”

Suzanne Clark credits Hemingway with crafting a politics of style that serves as the hallmark of twentieth-century novelistic narrative technique, which enacts the “struggle over how emotion is to be regulated and distributed, where feeling can be allowed” (31). Thus, Hemingway’s brand of modernism, according to Clark, with its narrative waverings and evasions, dramatize his characters’ explorations of their own personal pain, which “surfaces as the recollection of feeling in style” (139). Perhaps Jordan, and Hemingway, cannot, or refuse to fully imagine the ways in which Maria suffered, or they choose not to imagine something so horrific. This narrative evasion, though, serves to spectralize the actual atrocities committed by the Fascists in the same way that Pilar merely hints at the unspeakable horrors unleashed when the Fascists retook
the town after the massacre that her comrades committed. All we are left with is an abject body, who is not permitted to speak for herself. Hemingway’s technique, running all the way to his earliest fiction, is to refer to scenes of violence understatedly, litotically. The narrator of his early short story “On the Quai at Smyrna” uses the term “nice things” to refer to the dead bodies floating in the harbor (12). Hemingway’s use of litotes to elide an otherwise vivid scene of violence has its literary roots in Mark Twain, who has Huck Finn say that he saw “things” that he won’t ever “get shut of” on the day his friends are massacred. As storyteller and preacher, Pilar, then, reverses this ironic undertelling for Hemingway, taking to the far other extreme in revealing violence in clear and unrelenting view, in a way that Hemingway and Jordan in their relative stolidity cannot.

The one analog that Jordan resorts to for figuring post-traumatic pain, then, is a Belgian boy whom Jordan meets in a Spanish brigade in which he had served earlier. The boy had enlisted with five of his childhood friends, and all five were killed in combat. Ever since, Jordan noticed that the boy constantly cried silently to himself. “You looked up and there he was, crying. If you asked for the wine, he cried and if you passed your plate for stew, he cried; turning away his head. Then he would stop; but if you looked up at him, tears would start coming again. Between courses he cried in the kitchen. Every one was very gentle with him. But it did no good” (136). Jordan snaps out of his reverie resolving to “find out what became of him and whether he ever cleared up and was fit for soldiering again,” thus sweeping away any attempt at sympathy in considering the boy’s use-value as a soldier once again. It is significant that Jordan does not condemn that boy for what martial discourse would figure as “womanly tears” which he shed incessantly. It is a bizarre spectacle for Jordan, though, to be sure, and in his own stoic repression of his
own guilt he was never able to assimilate such a manifestation of trauma into his schema for human behavior until he meets Maria.

Jordan, however, seems not to understand Maria’s suffering, or he uses it as an exotic intrigue to gain political and social capital from her in the life he fantasizes for himself when he returns to teaching after the war. Jordan’s fantasy life is full of bourgeois comforts after the struggle he puts in now. He imagines how Maria will serve him as a wife, and a truism occurs to him that “Spanish girls make wonderful wives” and thinks about how they will present themselves in American society again as “Mr. and Mrs. Robert Jordan of Sun Valley, Idaho. Or Corpus Christi, Texas, or Butte, Montana” (164). He envisions her role as a faculty spouse when he gets his teaching job back, and thinks that “when undergraduates who take Spanish IV come in to smoke pipes in the evening and have those so valuable informal discussions about Quevedo, Lope de Vega, Galdós and the other always admirable dead, Maria can tell them about how some of the blue-shirted crusaders for the true faith sat on her head while others twisted her arms and pulled her skirts up and stuffed them in her mouth” (164-65).

Is this a healthy transition back to normal bourgeois life, where Maria is saved and her trauma can be assimilated, or is it lurid revolutionary posturing for Jordan, the fulfillment of a wartime fantasy in which he returns home with a few wounds and a gorgeous Spanish girl with quite a story to tell, adding to his own radical ethos? While this is doubtlessly calculated cynicism on Hemingway’s part, that’s also the best-case scenario that any American volunteer embroiled in the Spanish Civil War could hope for—a return to American bourgeois normalcy when the ideological struggle fall apart. Could one live with Auden’s “conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder,”
then, as long as one’s side was victorious in the end, while relaxing on summer evenings watching the bicycle races in the suburbs? In the end, after three tumultuous years being directly involved as a close spectator and bit actor in the Spanish Civil War, with all of his own evasions and betrayals, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* shows Hemingway in his old form—conveying the experiences of cynical, world-weary male protagonists fighting lonely psychological, moral, emotional battles—that he established in his earliest novels. He’s now able to use this technique, though, to launch the most direct yet nuanced political critique of his career. He rejects ideology as cynically as he did in the 1920s after the First World War, but he has gained a more seasoned and circumspect view of the temptations of ideology, having succumbed to them in the Spanish Civil War. In his late-career reflections on the painful conflict between political commitment and moral guilt, in “the necessary murder” and the moral equivocations that one must make to live with it, Hemingway was able to create modernism’s masterpiece of politically engaged fiction. It is Hemingway’s politics of style and sentiment’s subversion of the party line, then—the guilt that the warrior must bear—that makes the novel resonate, and serve as an artifact of the time that defies any use as propaganda.
CHAPTER 3
Severed Heads and Power Lines:

Postcolonial Violence in Modernist and Postmodernist Fiction

Things are desperate…when the leader himself begins to yield to despair, things are bad. The whole place is going to blow up, I cannot see how I can control the revolution now. When everybody wants to fight there’s nothing to fight for. Everybody wants to fight his own little war, everybody is a guerilla.

–Jimmy Ahmed in V.S. Naipaul’s *Guerillas* (156)

Between shame and shamelessness lies the axis upon which we turn; meteorological conditions at both these poles are of the most extreme, ferocious type. Shamelessness, shame: the roots of violence.


At the 1996 Hay Festival at Hay-on-Wye, Wales, V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie were brought together for the first time on a public stage. At this point in their careers, both had already written the novels that had established their reputations as two of the most prominent Anglo-Indian, postcolonial writers of the late twentieth century. Though they would both enter the twenty-first century as literary giants who had weathered long and difficult struggles in their professional and personal lives, their personal sagas had run in two very different, yet oddly parallel directions. Though the public exchange between the two authors that day was cordial,¹ both authors in the years prior to this meeting regarded each other warily, if not antagonistically.²

The epigraphs above, though, perfectly encapsulate the differing values that the authors each attach to violence in their fiction, and their differing views on the role and nature of violence in the world. The quote from Naipaul’s *Guerillas* is from the antihero-protagonist Jimmy Ahmed, reflecting in his diary about the nature of violent grievances and the futility, or increasing uselessness, of political causes. “Everyone wants to fight his own little war,” Jimmy says, suggesting that all of his fellow Trinidadians have
grievances against something, some form of injustice, that’s liable to explode into armed violence, where everyone is his own “guerilla,” an army of one, so to speak. Jimmy’s notion that “there’s nothing to fight for” when every man is fighting for his own personal cause, suggests that unified political action is no longer feasible. People can’t rally around a shared political cause and make the requisite sacrifices when everyone is fighting for themselves. This suggests a departure from organized political action in any traditional sense, whether a shared political cause is supported and advanced for pragmatic or ideological reasons. In Chapter 2, I discussed how the ideological magnetism of the Spanish Republican cause was sufficient to garner volunteer support from leftists all over the world, who banded together and in many cases risked or sacrificed their lives to support any aspect of left politics, and/or to fight the spread of fascism. Jimmy yearns for shared political commitment, which is either no longer possible or desirable for the people of Trinidad. His thoughts suggest an idealized political situation of shared political commitment and responsibility that he fears was perhaps never possible in Trinidad to begin with. That is why he, as would-be leader, despairs. In any case, the belief in ideology as a force capable of moving masses is absent in Jimmy’s Trinidad, and what’s left is a politically fragmented landscape of petty guerilla wars. Jimmy’s personal drama, which explodes in horrific violence at the novel’s end, is what drives the narrative of Guerillas forward; thus, Jimmy Ahmed, who is Naipaul’s most iconic antihero, commits the same personal violence, without political direction, that he fears among others.

By contrast, Rushdie’s quote from his early novel Shame shows a much broader, global view of violence. “The axis on which we turn” is an expansive statement on the
nature and affairs of humanity (“we”) itself. Rushdie’s view makes no individual
distinctions about violence here. In fact, he makes no less of a claim as to the nature of
humanity, and the forces that enact violence, not just in his own time, but for all time. He
likens the concepts of “shamelessness” and “shame” to forces of nature, “extreme”
“meteorological conditions” that determine human relations. All particular instances of
violence, at whatever level, for whatever motives, proceed from there. Though the novel
*Shame* deals with the political and cultural dysfunction throughout the relatively brief
history of Pakistan’s statehood, the general states of “fear” and “rage,” “shamelessness”
and “shame,” are emotions to which all humans are subject. The political distinctions of
the Pakistani situation are consequential in the book; yet their root causes are common
and identifiable to all. Thus, Rushdie expects or hopes that all of his readers can relate to
the drama, the struggles and violence therein, without necessarily knowing anything
about the actual historical people and events he’s referencing.

While the scope of each author’s critique of violence may be vastly different—
Naipaul focuses on the micro-level, local, personal cases of violence; and Rushdie with
global, transhistorical, and universal forces—each author’s view transcends or subverts
modern political justifications for violence. With Naipaul, we’re grounded from the start
in the world of individuals, in the discourses of sociology and psychology that constitutes
a psychopathology. Violence, when figured through individuals, destabilizes the broader
political determinants as well, just as individual motives may supersede or subvert public
political projects. With Rushdie, by contrast, we’re in the realm of cosmic forces that
transcend individual, national, sectarian distinctions. He’s working with archetypes, and
the particulars seem to only ground and color the grand concepts he’s trafficking in. This
global view would relativize and ultimately transcend the political determinants, even though much of Rushdie’s fiction, and indeed the personal drama of his own life, is concerned with specifically identifiable political phenomena and public figures. For both Naipaul and Rushdie, large-scale political action is perhaps not desirable, and perhaps not even possible (at least not for very long) in any stable sense. And herein lies the postmodern departure from the modern conception of politics as a series of shared projects of ideological investment. In the postmodern view, the political project is seen as either shattered and fragmented at the micro-level of individuals, or just one instance of some global, transterritorial, macro-level conception of human affairs. For Naipaul, the Iranian Revolution had quickly broken down into millions of angry, disaffected individuals. For Rushdie, the Iranian fatwa tapped into the worst impulses of human nature on a global level, which had less to do with politics or religion than with mass hysteria. Naipaul’s and Rushdie’s literary critiques of Iran show the contrast of the ethos of the two authors starkly. Naipaul saw the Iranian Revolution—and indeed every postcolonial upheaval—as the temporary and compelling channeling of individual grievances into some larger political project. Yet that project is fundamentally unstable, and ready to dissolve at any moment into the anarchy from whence it came. Rushdie saw the Iranian fatwa as a global phenomenon that revealed the worst aspects of human nature writ large, and therefore greatly to be feared.

The subject matter of political violence in the Third World serves as a historical point of analysis in this chapter. In the twenty-five years after the Second World War, most European states had abdicated all of their colonies abroad. Much of the decolonization was instigated, though, through bloody anticolonial wars and
insurrections. With the wars of decolonization in the two decades following World War II, organized political resistance was used to launch campaigns, both violent and non-violent, against the colonial powers. Rural guerilla warfare against occupying armies was waged in hot zones like Algeria and Vietnam. Insurgents also occasionally resorted to the bombing of military facilities, as well as public venues where Europeans did business. Street protests and riots, sometimes spontaneous and sometimes organized, were also launched in many colonial cities. When the colonizing powers fought back, notably with the French repression of insurgents in Algeria, they sometimes resorted to brutal counterinsurgency techniques which notably included torture, as in the Algerian case. The wars of decolonization, which were waged around the world in varying degrees of intensity, continued on until 1975, when the Portuguese finally released their hold on Angola and Mozambique. Then, when leftist groups stepped in to fill the power vacuum, sometimes through violent revolution, the U.S. waged overt (as in the cases of Cuba and Vietnam) or covert action (as in the cases of Chile and Afghanistan, in supporting anti-communist insurgencies) to oust the newly established communist regimes. This was the context of the postcolonial societies in which Naipaul and Rushdie grew up.

Naipaul was born in Trinidad in 1932, a full thirty years before the islands gained their independence from the British. His family had moved there from India in the mid-nineteenth century to work as indentured servants in the sugarcane plantations. Thus, Naipaul came from a family who had been dislocated through the legacy of exploitative colonial labor practices. For a young student with the talent and ambition that Naipaul possessed, his only recourse for social, educational, and economic advancement was to move to a metropolitan center, London. It was his experience as an immigrant from the
colonies, relatively privileged but still socially marginal, that informed his views on the alienation borne of global migrations, and the struggles of the newly formed postcolonial states that could not rise above their material impoverishment. Almost without variation, Naipaul condemned the postcolonial states and individuals for being politically corrupt, exploited by First World powers, and their people socially and economically malformed.

Naipaul has often been critiqued for the unremitting pessimism that pervades his works, in which he sees all of his characters’ circumstances as cause for despair. The mood of desperation and loathing for self, others, and material conditions do, indeed, pervade most of his novels. Naipaul’s authorial perspective is heavy-handed in this sense, as he tries to convey a general pattern of ruin in these postcolonial societies where the promises of wealth keep their citizens in thrall. As a stylistically modernist writer, then, Naipaul seeks to render an ordered vision and to make patterns emerge out of the formal fragmentation of his narratives, but he also uses this fragmentation to occlude the full views of the circumstances in which his characters find themselves. Naipaul’s use of fragmentation can then be seen as a corrective to traditional realist narratives in fiction that posit an ordered and knowable world. Naipaul said that “[s]ocieties everywhere have been fractured by all kinds of change: technological, social, political. We can no longer regard the action of a novel as covering a little crisis, a little curve on the graph which will then revert to the nice, flat, straight, ordered life: and I think this is one reason why…the traditional novel is just no longer possible” (qtd. in Hayward 169). For Naipaul, as for most other modernists, the bourgeois equilibrium of Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy is gone, as is their “slow development of character.” As corrupt as the societies these nineteenth-century authors depict might have been, they were still much more
stable than the postcolonial societies of the Third World writer in the late twentieth century. Quiet reflection is a luxury that Naipaul doesn’t afford his characters who live in political hotspots, for whom the search for a stable identity, both political and personal, is a matter of survival. The grievances of the oppressed people in postcolonial states are valid, but the means by which they express their grievances inevitably find their outlet in intense but impotent violence.

Naipaul can best be understood as expressing modernist cultural sensibilities in his writing, though his technique, without variation, is actually rigorously realist. As author, Naipaul seeks to represent the world in an unflinching, engaging social realism. His fiction is as lucid as his travel writing in revealing what he sees as the material decay and misery of the people he encounters. However, Naipaul is a literary modernist in his yearning for an ordered world amidst the broken pieces of postcolonial society. His protagonists occupy precisely the subject position of the male modernist heroes who despair over the present state of society and yearn for some internalized order. Furthermore, at a time when literary modernism was on the wane from the late 1960s onward, Naipaul used the modernist technique of psychological realism he attempted to portray in his characters, through either the first- or third-person perspectives. The technique of conveying characters’ thoughts, impressions, and emotions in states of intensity has its literary precedents as far back as Poe and Dostoevsky. In this way, Philip Fisher usefully claimed in his Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel that the twentieth-century novel can aptly be called the “romance of consciousness” in that the psychological and emotional subjectivity of the protagonist normally serves as the novel’s central vantage point, and where this character’s interior monologue is often
“intensified to the point of derangement” (97-98). Yet, as I argue in the following section, Naipaul’s technique for representing his protagonist-as-killer from the inside, while still showing the social discourses that enmesh him, has its direct literary forerunner in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. It is the relentless focus on the perceptions of the protagonists, and in showing the world in partial view through their own cracked lenses, that enables Naipaul to capture the experience of terror and to convey this terror. Naipaul’s use of both social and psychological realism, then, makes his approach markedly different from the postmodern technique of representing the world through multiple, coinciding perspectives in fiction.

Modernism attempts to represent images that convey emotion through language in the way that T.S. Eliot famously termed the “objective correlative.” Eliot defined the “objective correlative” as “[t]he only way of expressing emotion in the form of art” in which “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of the particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately released” (qtd. in Kenner 123). For Hugh Kenner, modernist poetry and prose transmit the objective correlative through a “lyric economy” that is “never eloquent about its real causes” (151)—the objective correlative thus expresses an act in all the raw emotion inherent in it, without discoursing upon the circumstances that brought the act about. Thus, the objective correlative lives by “the words for the action that concealed the real action” (156). David Harvey later claimed that “image, the appearance, the spectacle can all be experienced with an intensity (joy or terror) made possible only by their appreciation as pure and unrelated presents in time” in the modernist view (54). The objective correlative, the emotion-laden
act or image in literature, lives intensely in the moment, and too much explanation would divest it of its emotional power.

Eliot’s objective correlative is an early theoretical means of explaining literature’s means of conveying emotion through language. Recent theoretical interventions offer further explanation of the ways in which emotionally intense states act upon literary narrative. In Philip Fisher’s *The Vehement Passions* (2002), he offers a narratological account of the various modes of human emotion, stating that the “vehement” states of rage, anger, and grief have important consequences for literature since fiction, which relies on “moments of experience, rather than summary, generalization, or long perspectives of time, give[s] to vehement states an important position as one central matter for literature” (21-22). Fisher says that literary narrative must be advanced by certain episodes which have “for literary or narrative use, only a certain scale, which matches, among other things, the scale of an experience of the outburst, consequences, transformations, and settling into a calm of passion” (ibid.). Thus, while literature’s narrative is driven by episodes of violent, vehement emotions, they must be brought back into the narrative current by the emotional resolution of these passions. Brian Massumi, in his *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), focuses on the disruptive, subversive impact of the strong emotions upon narrative. The term he gives to emotion in narrative is “intensity” which he claims is “static—temporal and narrative noise,” a state of “suspense, potentially of disruption” (26). Thus, emotional intensity “would seem to be associated with nonlinear processes: resonance and feedback that momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future” (26). Intensity defies the current of narrative, and cannot be covered over by the flow of language in the narrative. Massumi
saying that intensity works in this way like “a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it” (26). Intensity is “filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonation”; and yet “it is not yet activity, because the motion is not of the kind that can be directed (if only symbolically) toward practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims” (ibid.). And importantly, when we try to narrativize the emotional intensity, when linguistic expression “doubles a sequence of movements in order to add something to it in the way of meaningful progression...a more or less definite expectation, an intimation of what comes next in a conventional progression,” that’s when the narrativizing “runs counter to and dampens the intensity” (26). As Kenner summed up for modernism, literature is “never eloquent” about the “real causes” of the objective correlative’s “set of objects,” “situation,” or “chain of events which shall be the formula of the particular emotion” (151). Too much explanation kills the emotion.

Modernism, as a set of literary techniques that prevailed in elite fiction throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, embraced the objective correlative as the means of conveying a powerful emotional experience that is crucial to the narrative of the text. In contemporary critical discourse, whether we call it a “vehement passion” or “emotional intensity,” emotion acts upon the text in crucial and disruptive ways, and the rest of the text must reckon with the experience in the immediate context of the situation and the emotional and psychological lives of the characters. While we may see the events that cohere and lead directly to the act of violence in the modernist narrative, there is usually no attempt made to analyze the act from a detached perspective through the characters’ own discourse.
Postmodernism takes precisely this detached, analytical perspective and conveys it through multiple registers, in multiple contexts, in the text. In his *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale claims that while the spatial construct of realist and modernist writing is “organized around a perceiving subject, either a character or the viewing position adopted by a disembodied narrator,” postmodern fiction, by contrast, operates in a “heterotopian zone” which is “less constructed than *deconstructed* by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time” (45). The action, and the emotional intensity, are no longer registered through one or a few characters, but rather filtered through a range of different perspectives of characters speaking out of different contexts, and viewing the action through different discursive frames of reference. McHale famously called the narratological difference between modernism and postmodernism a matter of the difference between epistemology and ontology. In modernism, we’re concerned with what we know, and what we can know, in one particular world inhabited by one particular set of characters. The questions modernism raises are thus epistemological. In postmodernism, we’re concerned with which *world* among many, each with its own set of explanations, is the one that we ought to be concerned with at the moment, an ontological question. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey sees the differences between modernism and postmodernism as a matter of different cultural ways of perceiving. Where modernism was “very much about the pursuit of better futures, even if perpetual frustration of that aim was conducive to paranoia,” postmodernism “strips away that possibility by concentrating upon the schizophrenic circumstances induced by fragmentation and all those instabilities (including those of language) that prevent us even picturing coherently, let alone devising strategies to
produce, some radically different future” (53-54). Harvey claims that “[w]e can no longer conceive of the individual as alienated in the classical Marxist sense, because to be alienated presupposes a coherent rather than a fragmented sense of self from which to be alienated” (53).

The modern subject is conceived as a thinking, feeling, autonomous human being in his pure state. As discussed in Chapter 2, the modernist subject in fiction is most often figured as male, and the modernist hero is one who is self-sufficient, lives by his own moral code, and renounces the pressures of society wherever possible. Whether or not this self-sufficiency and moral autonomy are possible in the fiction, this lost sense of order is a utopian impulse desirable in the fiction, whether it existed in some idealized past or in some deep structure that undergirds humanity. When internal and external forces threaten this autonomy and challenge this composure, the modernist subject is at his most agonistic. The difference that McHale outlines between modernism’s epistemological frame of reference and postmodernism’s ontological equates precisely to Timothy Melley’s claim in Empire of Conspiracy that the modernist text is beset by paranoia (the belief in one master plot and one possible explanation for it), whereas the postmodernist text is beset by schizophrenia (the belief in multiple plots and multiple possible explanations at hand at any given moment). Melley applies the clinical term “paranoia” for the modernist character in struggle. There’s one hidden plot beneath the surface appearance of things, and the modern man, for his survival, must discover what that plot is. As Harvey claims, the modern view of the subject carries over into the public realm of politics. The modern political project, in its ideal sense, has a clearly defined ideology that gains adherents, is advanced by a visible set of symbols that manifest
ideological power in overt and subtle ways, and strives for clearly definable plans for action to bring about clearly definable end goals. This was the magnetic drawing power of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s as a war of ideologies. Jimmy Ahmed’s lament in this chapter’s epigraph shows the political leader’s despair when the movement he’s trying to pull together falls apart. The political ideal of shared struggle and sacrifice has fragmented into thousands of individual revolutions, every man for himself.\(^5\)

Postmodernism, by contrast, embraces the fragmented state of the world and takes the impossibility of shared political struggle as its starting point. Melley’s clinical term for the postmodern state is “schizophrenia,” in which the unified, composed self is no longer possible, and the subject is composed of multiple selves, acting in response to multiple possible situations.\(^6\) In politics, people act as subjects that occupy ever-changing positions in the grid of power relations. Postmodern authors operate on this principle, positing their characters from multiple perspectives, from multiple frames of reference. There is a crucial difference in the ways pain is expressed in postmodern novels. The besieging of the modern self as the site of pain is no longer the focus. Instead, as Linda Hutcheon claims, postmodernism treats the meaning of history not as a matter of “what hurts” but of “what we say once hurt” (78). The self as feeling subject no longer serves as the privileged focus of narrative. What gets emphasized in postmodern narrative, instead, are the media through which messages of suffering are conveyed. Hutcheon claims “we are both irremediably distanced by time [from those who suffer] and yet determined to grant meaning to that real pain of others (and ourselves)” (ibid.). This is the crucial point about the difference between the modernist and postmodernist treatment of violence in fiction. Modernist fiction foregrounds the self as the site of violence and pain, and makes
this experience in all its intensity a crucial component of the narrative. Postmodern fiction, then, is concerned with the causes and consequences of the incident, but does not make the incident itself the focus of the narrative. Postmodern fiction compels its readers to ascribe their own meanings to the suffering after examining it from various angles. Of course, the delineations between modern and postmodern technique are never this clear, and indeed McHale acknowledges that a modernist novelist like Faulkner experimented with techniques in his fiction (such as questioning the ways in which history gets constructed in *Absalom, Absalom!* that would otherwise seem characteristically postmodern (10). Yet, it’s useful to oppose postmodernism to modernism to explain the differences between these two particular authors in terms of their differing perspectives and techniques, while otherwise dealing with very similar postcolonial subject matter. Where modernism focuses on the violence itself, and is caught up in that immediate context, it is through that context that a modernist writer like Naipaul seeks to terrify and disturb, where a postmodern writer like Rushdie seeks to analyze and even to console in exploring the discourses surrounding the violence. Naipaul seeks to make the objective correlative of violence raw and powerful; Rushdie seeks to reveal the forces behind the objective correlative, thus making it less frightening and more familiar.

Postmodernism’s tendency to discourse upon violent acts and spectacles of terror, in effect, divests the spectacle of its power to terrify. Anthony Kubiak discusses in his *Stages of Terror: Terrorism, Ideology, and Coercion as Theatre History* the “phobic object” in theatrical situations that is used to convey terror in an audience in a way that is “feelingly perceived” in “the terrorizing play of human thought itself” (16). The terror of the gun pointed at one’s head, of the bomb exploding in the café, of the mangled corpses
paraded in the streets, are all phobic objects that convey a visceral sense of fear in the audience in the immediate sense. It is almost impossible to think about the circumstances that brought us to this dreadful pass when one is caught up in the terror of the moment. If the phobic object is to have any power at all, though, it must be disarticulated from the sociopolitical coordinates in which it’s inscribed. When the spectacle becomes the topic of discourse, when it’s mediated and explained, that’s when we can apprehend it and contemplate it rationally. As I will explain further, the rape and dismemberment of a woman in Naipaul’s *Guerillas* is the ultimate catastrophe from which there is no narrative resolution. The killer is permanently destroyed at that point. By contrast, the decapitation of a woman, a bitter act of revenge borne out of love as much as hate, is one violent act among many in Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* that serves a more metaphorical purpose, and becomes just one incident out of many for a killer who becomes more of a political symbol, a metaphor for Islamist violence, from that point on. Decapitation in Naipaul is a shock and a trauma that the killer can’t bear to face, from which the killer does not seem to be able to recover. Decapitation in Rushdie is poetic, the headless corpse rendered as a fountain spurting blood, and provides the occasion for an ironic quip about the ever-growing market for psychopaths-for-hire.

The major difference between modernist and postmodernist fictive accounts of terrorism lies in the ways their narratives encapsulate terrorism structurally. In modernist texts, the protagonist is the focus of the narrative, and everything is intimately filtered through this perspective either in the first or third person. The reader sees everything as it progresses (even if the narrative may play all sorts of chronological tricks with time and sequencing), and evades showing all incidents in comprehensive detail as they actually
occur. It is precisely through this narrative lens that focuses on one or only a few people, representing their emotional states intensely in the moment, that modernist fiction allows terror to resonate in the narrative. This amounts to a psychological realism that Naipaul uses to give emotional depth to his characters. This was the same technique that Hemingway used through Pilar’s storytelling of the atrocities committed by the rebels in the town, just as it was for Naipaul’s focusing on the atrocity committed by Jimmy Ahmed against Jane.

In modernism, the violent act is crucial, if not central. The entire narrative thrust is directed toward such acts, and the philosophical, moral, or ethical debate (both internally and externally) revolves around it. For Naipaul, Jimmy’s rape and dismemberment of Jane is the final shimmering horrific event that gives deeper meaning to all earlier events, and it comes at the very end of the novel, without further discoursing. The reader is left to ponder it. In Massumi’s formulation, the act of violence serves as a “temporal sink” in the narrative, in which the event stands on its own and draws the narrative, and our attention, into it. It should also be mentioned that filtering or withholding the details of the central violent act can also deepen the impact of such violent acts. In the case of some of Faulkner’s novels, for example, the fateful act of violence that we don’t see (as in Henry Sutpen’s murder of Charles Bon in Absalom, Absalom! or Popeye’s rape of Temple Drake in Sanctuary) are crucial, and serve as the absent center of the narrative that gives meaning to all prior and future events. It could be argued that the acts of violence that are untold or undertold (as in Huck Finn’s “things I won’t ever get shut of” or Hemingway’s “pretty things” floating in the water in “On the Quai at Smyrna”) are even more resonant because they require precisely the act of
imagination on the part of the reader to figure them. Indeed, some modernist works use both techniques to heighten the intensity of the act, as is the case with the village massacre of the fascist neighbors in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, where Pilar told the story of the murders in relentlessly explicit detail while also withholding the details of the even-worse reprisal that followed three days later. Whether the details of the violent act are given explicitly, elided, or effaced, the act is still crucial for determining the flow of the modernist narrative.

What postmodernism does by contrast, then, is relativize the effects of such atrocities by filtering the events through multiple discursive perspectives. In the postmodern novel, the violent act is deconstructed, dissected, explained from all different angles, and replayed from various perspectives from multiple subject-positions. The violent act may be central to these debates as well, but it does not take on the emotional gravity (the intensity, in Massumi’s formulation) so as to disturb and consume the narrative movement of the text. Throughout most of Rushdie’s fiction, and especially in his novels that treat political topics explicitly, he does not employ the psychologically realistic glimpse at a few select characters as Naipaul does, but instead presents his characters as types, and at times caricatures that represent broader geopolitical forces. Moreover, vast spans of time are covered and folded into the postmodern narrative. Most of Rushdie’s novels encapsulate the events of several years, decades, and even centuries in the present moment of their narrative. Thus, the violent acts can be seen in their full, temporal consequences, which take on universal patterns.

Modernist novels foreground the site of violence (“what hurts” in Hutcheon’s formulation) and use it as a crucial, transformative episode that punctuates and dominates
the narrative. The focus on the act of violence and the perspective of the character make these novels psychologically realistic, and the author intends to convey the experience of terror through conspicuously foregrounding these aspects. Postmodernist novels, then, foreground the discourse surrounding the site of violence (“what we say once hurt”). The violent act does not take a crucial place in the narrative itself, and instead the narrative moves far beyond and behind the violence. Postmodern authors attempt to promote critical engagement with the violence itself rather than focusing solely on the site of violence. Thus, the modernist author Naipaul attempts to terrify readers through the intensity of the violent act itself. We’re caught up in the moment, and in the thoughts and emotions of the characters themselves. The postmodernist author Rushdie attempts to compel readers to examine and reflect upon the violence, and goes to great lengths to present all of the historical and personal factors that enmesh the act. In their roles as novelists, then, Naipaul is an activist who seeks to terrorize his readers and grate against their sympathies, while Rushdie is an analyst who strives to make his readers gain a deeper understanding of the causes of violence and their place in the grand scheme.

1. Naipaul’s Guerillas: The Vortex of Terror in the Modern Postcolonial Subject

They seem to me to carry a distillation of the country’s unhappiness. I don’t think there is any one single simple action which can help. You can’t take a gun and kill that unhappiness. All you can do is to kill people.
–Willie Chandran, Magic Seeds (162)

Hate oppression, but fear the oppressed.
–V.S. Naipaul, Interview, The Observer, 2004

Perhaps the biggest “news” in Naipaul’s Guerillas is the revolution that breaks out in the capital for two days, which we never actually see. The long-threatened event occurs near the end of the novel, but the orange glow of flames in the night sky and the occasional
column of smoke that billows up from the slums below are the only glimpses Naipaul gives us of what happens. We only hear rumors about the poor neighborhoods of the city going up in flames, store windows broken and shops looted, and U.S. Army helicopters rumbling above the treetops overhead. Then, just as quickly as it flares up, it’s all over. Nothing on the ground has changed, and the characters are left to wallow in their depression and mounting frustration. The revolution was a real letdown. The real catastrophe in the novel occurs at the very end, and it takes the form of a brutal rape and dismemberment of one single woman. The “guerillas” of the title are illusory, and the only real guerilla, who mounts his own intensely personal war, is the man who commits the rape and murder.\footnote{7}

Part of what makes Naipaul’s vision in his fiction seem so full of despair is that the people who struggle against their material limitations never have their struggles validated. The violence they inflict never actually does anything except destroy the people and property at hand. Naipaul sees violence as futile and its agents powerless to change the political situation at hand in any lasting sense. Violence is a temptation for many of Naipaul’s characters because in committing the violent act, they finally gain a sense of agency—they are finally making something happen. They are breaking out of the stasis, turning their rage upon some deserving or undeserving victim. Throughout Naipaul’s fiction, this dynamic is most explicitly played out in sex acts, which give his male characters a momentary sense of agency, but which often result in the victimization of the unwilling partners involved. But nothing really changes afterwards, and the agents are no better, and probably worse off than they were beforehand. This is the cycle of
violence in Naipaul’s novels, and this was just as apparent in Guerillas in 1975 as it was in Magic Seeds in 2004.

“Great novels. Dreadful politics.” That is how Terry Eagleton summed up V.S. Naipaul, and indeed, many critics and fellow writers have voiced similar disgust with him (qtd. in French 6). Edward Said has blamed Naipaul for serving as a perennial apologist for imperialism, and many leftist writers and academics have found Naipaul’s support for contemporary Tory politics abhorrent. Naipaul has also frequently been condemned for his racist attitudes towards blacks, Indians, and whites. There’s no denying that Naipaul has always regarded left-wing causes cynically. In his view, such activities are most often ill-conceived, carried out by the ignorant and the corrupt, and always end in disaster—whether the revolution gets crushed by a First World power or if the new regime it establishes becomes even more tyrannical than the one it replaced. In any case, Naipaul sees revolutions as always betraying the people they purport to champion, its foot soldiers always manipulated by their predatory leaders. In all of his novels (and indeed this is no exaggeration), Naipaul expressed in detail the very nihilism that many of his postcolonial critics have spent their entire careers analyzing on the ground—the desperation of people in Third World nations who are full of squandered potential, and always ready to explode with unchanneled anger. Leftist cultural and political critics like Said and Eagleton should appreciate that Naipaul’s fiction actually plays out the violent impulses of the subaltern, from the perspective of one who can identify with the subaltern from personal experience. Perhaps this critical castigation of Naipaul calls for a paradigm shift, since Naipaul is in effect making the same claims about First World capitalist exploitation that
Marxist and postcolonial critics like Eagleton and Said, respectively, are making in their critical theory.

When Naipaul entered into the greatest period of his writing career in the 1970s, he was writing in the context of two decades of anticolonial violence that were finally coming to a close. Naipaul would certainly agree with anticolonial political theorist Frantz Fanon’s assessment of the plight of the colonized peoples in his 1961 masterwork *The Wretched of the Earth*. In this popular leftist revolutionary text, heralded by many anticolonial and Black Power activists as an inspirational tome, Fanon wrote that “the native’s impulse to murder is expression of their collective unconscious conditioned by oppression” (18). Naipaul certainly understood this impulse as active in his native Trinidad, as well as in postcolonial Africa during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Naipaul acknowledged that more than a century of British colonialism had left these societies in shambles, but unlike Fanon, Naipaul was highly skeptical that any of the formerly colonized people could improve their material circumstances with or without colonial domination.¹⁰

In Naipaul’s most recent novel, *Magic Seeds*, which he wrote a full three decades after *Guerillas*, he asserts that it’s almost impossible to even start a revolution based among the people who are the most sorely oppressed and in need of reform. In an Indian village, as the guerilla Joseph is guiding the novel’s picaro Willie Chandran, Joseph points out a malnourished, hunchbacked servant girl and says, “[h]er village is full of people like her, very small, very thin. Cricket people, matchstick people. Their minds have gone after the centuries of malnourishment. Do you think you can make a revolution with her?” (43). Joseph deflates any sense of romanticism of the revolutionary cause that
Chandran might have brought with him: “[w]hen people here talk of the guerillas they are
talking of people like her. It’s not exciting. It’s not Che Guevara and strong men in
military fatigues” (ibid.). In a statement that perfectly sums up Naipaul’s view of the
legacy of colonialism in the postcolonial world, Joseph takes in the miserable scene in
front of him: “we are looking at the cruelty of history. And the most terrible thing is it
can’t be avenged” (43). Vengeance assumes that there’s an identifiable culprit, the target
for an agent’s actions to be directed towards, and a victory to be achieved through
violence. With a system of abuses that had devastated the land and the people for several
centuries, then, there can be no such vengeance for the postcolonial poor and no
identifiable enemy to target any more.

Whenever Naipaul does address the actual physical violence done in an
insurrection, he only shows its after-effects and obfuscates the action as it’s occurring. In
A Bend in the River, the Congolese guerillas who attempt to destroy a newly erected
hydroelectric dam leave only damaged equipment and power lines “like a rage against
metal, machinery, wires, everything that was not of the forest and Africa,” like “the rage
of simple men tearing at metal with their hands” (81). The human toll their violence takes
is signified only by the severed head of the American missionary Father Huismans,
mounted on a spike. Naipaul describes the constant cycle of violence, where “[h]aving
destroyed their town, [the people] had grieved for it. They had wished to see it a living
place again. And seeing it come to a kind of life again, they had grown afraid once more”
(67). The people are only turning their rage upon themselves, and squandering their
chances of material improvement—nihilism in practice, as Naipaul sees it.
For both Naipaul and Fanon, history’s trauma continues to be experienced in the systematic oppression that European imperialism wrought upon the subjugated peoples of the colonized world, which for Naipaul continues long after the postcolonial nations gained their independence. Fanon was among the most eye-opening critics and proponents of anticolonial violence, who served to explain such violence in the context of modern clinical psychology and sociology. Specifically, Fanon saw the postcolonial subject’s impulse to violence as ensuing from the signs and promises of the material benefits of modern capitalist society all around him—colonialism’s “gifts” to its colonized subjects—but which he can never seem to be able to attain himself (cf. 153-81). When the postcolonial subject’s hopes and dreams are frustrated, he lashes out violently against those who control the unequal society in which he lives, who withhold the goods of modern capitalism from him. Naipaul concurred with this observation, claiming in his essay “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa” that the citizen of the postcolonial republic cannot connect the causes of his poverty—Western capitalist exploitation—with its effects—the misery he experiences in postcolonial life every day. Violent massacres are liable to flare up like brush fires in countries like Congo, Uganda, and Trinidad. Everybody is disgruntled and angry. Everybody in these societies, therefore, is a potential terrorist. Violence may serve political ends, and may be used for political causes like the popular cults of Mobutu or Idi Amin, but these charismatic figures are as corrupt as every other dictator who came before. For Naipaul, in exactly the scenarios that scholars like Fanon warned against, the tyrannies of colonialism are replayed over and over in the violence of the postcolonial nation. The postcolonial subject is traumatized, psychologically and spiritually deformed
after being colonized for so long. In the words of Naipaul’s killer-protagonist in *Guerillas*, “When everybody wants to fight there’s nothing to fight for. Everybody wants to fight his own little war, everybody is a guerilla” (156).

It is Naipaul’s condemning of leftist revolutionary and Third World nationalist movements that has led many of Naipaul’s critics to call him staunchly conservative, pro-imperialist, and even racist. After all, Naipaul chastised the black power movements of the 1960s and 1970s as they rose up throughout the world. Naipaul thought these racially based movements were especially corrupt and faultily based on naïve notions of racial solidarity. In Trinidad, Naipaul claimed that the black power movement “obscures the problems of a small independent country with a lopsided economy, the problems of a fully ‘consumer’ society that is yet technologically untrained and without the intellectual means to comprehend the deficiency” (“Michael X” 70). People ignorant enough to follow such movements use race as a convenient means for political mobilization, “a wish to be granted a dispensation from the pains of development” (ibid.). Furthermore, he sees the promoters of race-based politics as charlatans caught up in “an almost religious conviction that oppression can be turned into an asset, race into money” (ibid.).

Naipaul saw racially motivated violence as nothing more than a temporary outlet for pent-up aggression, whether it occurs in the Third World or the First. In his 1971 short story “One Out of Many,” Naipaul writes of Santosh, a Trinidadian immigrant living in Washington, DC during the race riots of the mid-1960s. Santosh watches the destruction of the inner city on TV in a reverie of “prayer and repentance”: “It burned like a famous city and I didn’t want it to stop burning. I wanted the fire to spread and spread and I wanted everything in the city, even the apartment block, even the apartment,
even myself, to be destroyed and consumed” (44). When the violence is quelled and the flames put out a few days later, Santosh is moved by the sense of victory among the poor blacks: “[h]appiness was on the face of the hubsi. They were like people amazed they could do so much, that so much lay in their power. They were like people on holiday. I shared their exhilaration” (44-45). When future riots threaten to ignite, someone paints “Soul Brother” on the pavement in front of Santosh’s door, yet Santosh no longer feels any sense of brotherhood. Granted, the American blacks have a long history of oppression in the U.S., and the mid-1960s race riots arose out of mounting pressure that had everything to do with generations of material deprivation and racist injustice. Santosh, as a recent immigrant, may sympathize in a general sense with the experience of alienation of the American blacks he lives among, but his experience in America does not have the same historical roots. Thus, his enjoyment of their violent spectacle is nihilistic in general—he might view the student protests in Paris at the time with the same exhilaration. Santosh decides that he should live free of the daily concerns of business and material acquisition in America, yet parts with the closing observation that “[a]ll that my freedom has brought me is the knowledge that I have a face and I have a body, that I must feed this body and clothe this body for a certain number of years. Then it will be over” (61). Violence may offer its perpetrators a sense of empowerment, and it may seem world-consuming at the time, but it’s all just theater, a momentary escape, in the end. The dispossessed must still face the set of grinding responsibilities in their daily lives, and nothing really changes except that the neighborhoods they live in are ruined even further. They haven’t changed the political realities on the ground at all, and the brotherhood of racial solidarity is revealed to be a sham by the light of day.
One must turn to *Guerillas* to get Naipaul’s real view on violence, which is at its most incandescent in his fiction when it is inflicted on a personal level, with personal emotion—terror—to underwrite it. In *Guerillas*, Naipaul’s psychological realism is at its most compelling, as the thoughts and fears of the characters all focus on Jimmy Ahmed, the killer-antihero, and as Jimmy’s own desires and fears are shown in lurid detail. Moreover, the fears of all characters become drawn to one particular act of violence in the narrative, conveyed in its full emotional intensity.

*Guerillas* crawls along uneasily through its malaise and slow-building dread, each subsequent detail about Jimmy Ahmed, a charismatic black revolutionary who runs a commune for street boys in Trinidad, creating the picture of a man bitterly disappointed and angry with his white liberal “friends.” Jimmy threatens to do something horrible at any moment. He is shown early on to be a pederast who preys upon the boys in his commune, a fugitive convicted of an earlier undisclosed sexual assault in London, and yet he is intriguing enough for the white Englishwoman Jane for her to carry on an affair with him. Jimmy fancies that he’s the paragon of enlightened Western ideals for his liberal benefactors, and especially for Jane. By novel’s end, full of rage at his imminent betrayal by Jane’s husband Peter Roche (a white former revolutionary from South Africa now working as a PR agent for a construction firm), Jimmy abducts Jane, sodomizes her, and dismembers her with a cutlass with the aid of one of the commune boys, calling her a “white rat” (“rat” being Trinidadian slang for “whore”). No matter how one summarizes the novel, Jane’s gruesome murder overdetermines everything else, being arguably the most memorable act of violence in all of Naipaul’s fiction. This brutal violation of a white, liberal, metropolitan woman by a black, revolutionary, Third World man is a
difficult fact to reconcile with liberal sensibilities. This incident, though, perfectly crystallizes Naipaul’s views on political violence—the most intimately personal acts of violence have much broader-reaching sociopolitical significance, but their damage is purely physical, personal, and immediate. This violence is enacted upon the person herself, impacted upon the body, which is how Naipaul intends the force of the attack to impact readers the most viscerally.

Naipaul’s critique of black power was borne out to its most scathing extent in his 1974 essay, “Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad,” in which Naipaul reports the complex set of circumstances that led to the murder of the white Englishwoman Gale Benson by a black-power demagogue in Trinidad. “Michael X,” the revolutionary moniker of Michael Abdul Malik, served as the basis for Jimmy Ahmed. Malik moved to London from Trinidad in the mid-1960s and worked at a variety of unsavory jobs including pimp, drug dealer, and enforcer for underworld figures until he got caught up in England’s incipient black power movement. Naipaul claims that Malik was no intellectual, and that his involvement in black power was something he only played at, posing as a leftist revolutionary and basking in the glamour that such a role lent him at the time. After a stint in prison for a trumped-up charge of politically inflammatory speech and a subsequent, failed all-black commune experiment, Malik fled England back to Trinidad to set up another commune. This commune, at which Malik had gathered up to a dozen Trinidadians who were caught up in his charisma and revolutionary messianism, was the basis for Thrushcross Grange in Guerillas, Jimmy Ahmed’s home for Trinidadian street kids who serve as his catamites and killers on call. While this dynamic does not seem to have occurred in Naipaul’s account of Malik’s
actual commune, its denizens, who are all much older, are just as manipulable and share responsibility for the murders that Malik committed.\textsuperscript{12}

Malik is the perfect character study for Naipaul, whom he sees as wholly determined by the political forces surrounding him. Rather than an extreme and exceptional case, Naipaul takes Malik as symbolic of the corruption of black power movements in general. The power dynamics that went into the shaping of this messianic, would-be revolutionary killer, Naipaul saw demonstrative of both Third World postcolonial desperation and the left-liberal politics that would uncritically endorse race-based revolutionary politics in general. Naipaul harshly claims that “Malik’s career proves how much of Black Power—away from its U.S. source—is jargon, how much a sentimental hoax” (70), in which he is specifically referring to black power movements in Trinidad and other postcolonial countries. (In exempting “the U.S. source” of black power from his condemnation here, he seems to be hedging against condemning the more revered figures in the U.S. Civil Rights movement at that time.) Moreover, he sees such figures as engaged in only a sentimental spectacle, with their incendiary politics as theater for those who would buy into it: “The black rebel, even if he wanted to, couldn’t do a job”; yet “he couldn’t appear to be declining into ‘passivity’; anything like repose could extinguish his reputation. No one expected him to act out his threats, but the poor black was required ceaselessly to perform” (35).\textsuperscript{13}

Naipaul deliberately focuses on Jimmy as the vortex of the novel through which to give expression to the rage and despair of the postcolonial subject. Naipaul transfers these views of Malik directly onto Jimmy Ahmed in \textit{Guerillas}. Jimmy is the center-that-cannot-hold; he desires completion, self-sufficiency, self-actualization, but he’s deformed
by his malformed expectations. In Jimmy’s diary he constructs his fantasy identity of himself as classically educated, well-schooled in British culture (hence his frequent references to the Brontës, and naming of his commune “Thrushcross Grange” after the house in *Wuthering Heights*), charismatic, physically beautiful, and sexually irresistible for white women. The Trinidadian congressman Meredith Herbert observes that “[y]ou can do anything you like with Jimmy Ahmed. Anybody can use that man and create chaos in this place. He can be programmed. He’s the most suggestible man I know….He might be a millionaire. He might be the next prime minister. It all depends on how he’s programmed. In the kind of situation we have here anything is possible” (137). Herbert warns, “[t]omorrow that man might say something or make some gesture or stumble into some kind of incident, and overnight he could be a hero” (138). Thus, politics in postcolonial society, in Herbert’s view, is a matter of charisma and contingency, and petty scoundrels like Jimmy can take positions of power not through any sort of merit or initiative of their own.

Unlike the “classic” modernism of Hemingway decades earlier, Naipaul’s male subject must wrestle with the problems concerning race and social status. These forces are oppressive upon Jimmy, and determine his thoughts, impressions, and actions throughout the entire novel. As I discuss in Chapter 2, the typically male subject of modernism is figured by some authors and critics to be insular, clinging to a personal code that resists the various currents of his society. However, I argue that even novels like Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* that feature narrators who are resolutely disengaged from the political world around them are aware of the political struggles of their time and place, and that their choice to remain steadfastly uninvolved in those struggles constitutes
a political statement in itself. I argue that protagonist Robert Jordan’s own inner turmoil in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, as he rationalizes killing in warfare as the necessary toll that a sentimentally charged humanitarian cause must take, is modernism’s most direct engagement with an international political conflict of the time. However, one essential dimension that’s missing, as Hemingway presents it, is Jordan’s own engagement with identitarian issues. Jordan is shown to be white, Midwestern American, heterosexual, and apparently middle-class (he is a lecturer of Spanish at a Western college). The one personal trauma that he is shown to be dealing with is his father’s suicide, but apart from that, Jordan appears to come from a well-established family whose father figures for two generations all had distinguished military careers. The notion of returning to a bourgeois lifestyle in a Western city with Maria, as expatriated Spanish wife, beckons to him throughout. Jordan has a home to go to. He may face intense personal and political struggles in Spain, but his situation there is purely voluntary.

That is the crucial difference in the modernist novels written by Hemingway and the modernist novels written by those occupying the social margins of that society. Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright, America’s preeminent black writers of the modernist era, were compelled to address the racially, socially, and economically marginalized status of all of their protagonists, and this experience of American marginality, which leads to outright victimization (sometimes violent), is an essential component of their fiction.¹⁵

Naipaul, by contrast, mostly addresses social marginality in former colonies in the Third World. Where black American authors yearned for acceptance and integration in an America whose potential for accepting them seemed possible but unattainable at the time,
Naipaul’s characters live in fundamentally damaged, deformed societies that can never be repaired, in countries that hardly even function as states. They don’t just become unmoored; they were never moored in the first place, nor, he believes, could they ever be. The difference here is crucial as well. Naipaul has nothing but disdain for the postcolonial societies he chronicles: he believes such societies breed wounded subjects (indeed, he called independent India “a wounded civilization” in the title of one of his non-fiction works), and nobody is more dangerous than when they’re wounded. “Hate oppression, but fear the oppressed” Naipaul told an interviewer in 2004 (Adams). This is the credo that he abides by throughout all of his fiction and non-fiction. Naipaul is ambivalent at best about his protagonists. All are wounded, weary, and wary. In the case of Jimmy Ahmed in Guerillas, Naipaul intends his protagonist to be corrupted in every conceivable way. Yet he never fails to show us the sources of this corruption. All of the rage in Naipaul’s novel has its political coordinates.

As a modernist author, Naipaul’s technique of characterizing his victim-become-killer in Guerillas has its literary precedent in Richard Wright’s 1940 novel, Native Son. Wright created the model by which the narrative of a racialized killer-protagonist can account for many of the sociopolitical conditions in the society in which the killer grew, while still managing to disturb and appall through the acts of violence he commits. In Native Son, Wright famously vowed to create a protagonist that “banker’s daughters” would never weep over, and that his book should be “so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears” ([a]454). Wright’s narrative reveals the unfortunate situation in which Bigger Thomas finds himself as serial murderer and death-row convict, which is the result of others’ misunderstandings and misperceptions through
overt and covert racism, bad-faith liberal sympathy—which amounts here to misdirected sentiment for the oppressed racial other—and journalistic sensationalism. Wright was primarily concerned, then, with the environmental influences upon the character of Bigger, with “what had made him and what he meant” (ibid., his italics). Wright says that “all serious fiction” consists “almost wholly of character-destiny and the items, social, political, and personal, of that character-destiny” ([a]459). Therefore, Wright said he “tried to keep before the eyes of the reader at all times the forces and elements against which Bigger was striving” (ibid.).

Wright’s views of the material and spiritual impoverishment of the urban black man in the U.S. of the 1930s is similar to Naipaul’s view of postcolonial nationals in the 1960s and 1970s. Wright wrote that “the civilization which had given birth to Bigger contained no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold and claim his allegiance and faith, had sensitized him and had left him stranded, a free agent to roam the streets of our cities, a hot and whirling vortex of undisciplined and unchannelized impulses” (ibid. 445). The same could definitely be said of the rage of Jimmy Ahmed, and certainly Naipaul shows us shantytown Trinidad as rotten to the core. Granted, south-side Chicago of the 1930s was not Port-of-Spain in the 1970s; the social history of the blacks in Chicago’s ghettos and that of the poor Trinidadians were much different, with different histories of oppression. Yet, the subjectivities of both young male protagonists as shown in the psychological realism of both Wright and Naipaul were quite similar as delivered in the fiction.

The crucial difference between the two novels and their treatment of their killer-protagonists, though, is the shape that each narrative takes, which determines the
sympathy that each killer may be allotted. While Bigger’s actions—dismembering and incinerating the girl he accidentally suffocates, then bludgeoning his girlfriend, throwing her down an apartment shaft, and leaving her to die from her injuries—are gruesome and repulsive, our sympathy for him may be engendered in a sociological sense by the lurid view Wright gives us of the systemic urban poverty and racism in which Bigger had always lived, and from which he cannot realistically hope to escape. On the one hand, our sympathetic response may very well cast us as the well-meaning but myopic liberal family who welcomes Bigger into their home—we may well be embracing a potential killer. On the other hand, we as readers have a much fuller view of the material conditions of Bigger’s life than his benefactors do, and we can see his social conditions in much of their complexity. Granted, Bigger’s violence was voluntary, and he bore the full responsibility for his actions. Yet he acted within a set of inescapable socioeconomic circumstances, which severely limited his range of options and which determined others’ responses to him. We may condemn Bigger for his reactive violence, but at the same time we can lament the conditions that drove him to this turn.

Whereas Wright may redeem Bigger through the narrative progression beyond Bigger’s acts of violence that occur in the first third of the novel, Naipaul makes Jimmy emerge as a monster through his ultimate act of violence that occurs at the end of the novel. Because Naipaul ends Guerillas’ narrative shortly after Jimmy’s killing of Jane, with the surviving characters grasping at what to do next, the novel arrests Jimmy in the act, with the blood still on his hands.¹⁶ Crucially, Wright placed the murders that Bigger commits in the first third of the novel, and all that follows—the chase, the trial, and the execution—allow us to feel the full weight of Bigger’s actions upon him. Naipaul, by
contrast, plots Jimmy’s rape and murder of Jane at the very end of *Guerillas*, which comes as a shock with no resolution, no assimilation back into the normal workings of the world.

Naipaul leaves us with the portrait of Jimmy fresh with the blood of his victim, with his white liberal sympathizer Peter Roche, husband of the woman Jimmy had just killed, willing to lie to cover it up for him. In this sense, Naipaul invites us to see the white liberal sympathizer as *almost as* guilty as Jimmy himself. While Wright compels his liberal readers to contemplate a more racially just society which they can help build, Naipaul makes his liberal readers feel like shams and fools for believing they can befriend and help wounded and vicious creatures like Jimmy in the first place. The difference between the types of engagement with liberal readers is crucial here. In the 1940s, Wright sought to make his readers think about the causes of Bigger’s depravity, and gestured (though extremely tentatively and all-too-late for Bigger, at least) at a more just, more racially equal society in America. Naipaul, on the other hand, sought to indict and terrorize his liberal readers in the 1970s. Naipaul did not offer hope of redemption, and his novel ends with both the white liberal patron and the black killer locked in a mutual lie to cover up the murder of the white woman with whom they are both involved.

Importantly, though, Jimmy’s violation of Jane functions as more than a literal rape, but a metaphorical expression of the systemic violence that Naipaul sees occurring between First World and Third World parties in colonial and postcolonial relations. Helen Hayward claims that Naipaul uses the term “violation” throughout his works “in a variety of unexpected and metaphorical contexts, as a means of delineating the legacy and experience of imperial displacement” (158). Specifically, Hayward observes that the
metaphors of sexual violence often symbolize “inter-racial sexual violence, in which personal relations serve as a metaphor for the political” (159). Thus, race serves as proxy for geopolitical relations. Thus, Naipaul’s scripting of vivid scenes of sexual violation of white women by non-white men symbolizes sociopolitical revenge enacted violently. A similar instance of sexual violation occurs in Naipaul’s later novel *A Bend in the River*, in which the narrator Salim repeatedly slaps Yvette, the English wife of the ambassador Raymond, to the point of bloodying her nose after spitting on her pudenda, out of sheer resentment while he is engaged in an adulterous affair with her. Thus, sodomy and other forms of sexual degradation for Naipaul take on the dynamics of a sexual terrorism inflicted by members of one disenfranchised group upon the more privileged: a drastic means to shift the power dynamics by enabling those who are otherwise powerless to seize power violently on a personal level, through violating those who would otherwise be considered inviolable.

Sexual violence compounds itself to a revolting extent in *Guerillas*’ actual murder sequence. Jimmy sodomizes Jane forcefully after spitting into her mouth immediately before her murder, and he abjectifies her with gross scatological taunts as he drives her to the place where his accomplice Bryant is waiting to kill her. He commands Bryant to assault Jane by shouting “Kill the rat!” (238), and Bryant earlier refers to Jane as the “white rat” he wants to kill. Jimmy then restrains Jane as Bryant slashes at her with his cutlass. Naipaul shows the murder itself through an elided flash of corporeal images: “Sharp steel met flesh. Skin parted, flesh showed below the skin, for an instant mottled white, and then all was blinding, disfiguring blood, and Bryant could only cut at what had already been cut” (ibid.). The vividness of the assault is almost mercifully elided, and
Naipaul does not present the killing in graphic detail. However, Naipaul intends the phobic object of the murder scene to terrorize readers, and this focus on the primal scene, which the narrative only barely moves beyond, condemns Jimmy ultimately for readers. We are left with the shock of the murder ten pages before the end, and the violence is left to sting, unprocessed.

_Guerillas_ is a complex set of interlocking racial, class, and geopolitical conflicts, and enacts a horrifying scenario of misdirected vengeance at the personal level. Sexual relations stand in for political ones, and no party is innocent. Naipaul said that he meant Jane’s death to appall his readers because of their identification with her: “The fact that it shocks you is part of its success. But it’s the wrong kind of success if you just think, God, she was such an unpleasant girl. If she was really all that unpleasant, if you hadn’t been made to understand her, you wouldn’t have found her death to be so appalling” (qtd. in Hayward 161). Thus, the repulsion that Naipaul intends his readers to feel towards Jane’s rape and murder, are directed precisely at the heart of his readers themselves. Naipaul thus confesses that he intended his readers to identify with Jane as a white woman, all politics aside. He intends such an attack to stab at the heart of the liberal reader in guilty implication, after making the reader see the misguided nature of such sympathies when they are disingenuously given. This amounts to an act of literary terrorism by Naipaul.

If there’s any vindication here at all, it comes in the revenge fantasy that Jimmy acts out against the feminized metropolitan liberal ideal in the form of Jane, a symbolic revenge upon the exploitation of colonial and postcolonial Trinidadians at the hands of the British. For Naipaul, this revenge is uncannily acted out in a traumatic recurrence through Jimmy’s violence. The terror we are left with is the terror of the passions, and
Naipaul’s psychological realism builds up the terror through the perspectives of Jimmy Ahmed’s paranoid delusions and the other characters who regard Jimmy with disdain and apprehension. It is not any form of public terror through revolution that Naipaul would urge us to fear, but the violence inflicted by the damaged individual, the wounded postcolonial subject, that ought to be the greatest source of fear in our personal dealings with him.

2. The Sublime Terror of History and the Terrorism of Emotions: Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown and Fury*

For the rest of his life Max Ophuls would remember that instant during which the shape of the conflict in Kashmir had seemed too great and alien for his Western mind to understand, and the sense of urgent need with which he had drawn his own experience around him, like a shawl. Had he been trying to understand, or to blame himself for his failure to do so? Did the mind discover likeness in the unlike in order to clarify the world, or to obscure the impossibility of such clarification? He didn’t know the answer. But it was one hell of a question.

– *Shalimar the Clown* (180)

Maximilian Ophuls, the U.S. ambassador to India, was momentarily shaken to his core when he first came to Kashmir and stared out over the Himalayan valley in which most of the book’s action would occur. When faced with a foreign conflict that he was perhaps not prepared to face in its full complexity, Ophuls was gripped by a sublime sense of fear. However, he finds solace in his contrived view that the centuries-long territorial and sectarian conflict in Kashmir is no different, in essence, from that of his native Alsace in France. In analogizing the war in Kashmir with the wars in central Europe, the Western subject is able to conceptualize, and thereby familiarize himself with, a vast and complex conflict in another corner of the world, involving a much different set of people. It is telling that while the one major public event that occurs in Naipaul’s *Guerillas* is the squelched revolution in the capital which amounted to nothing more than an impromptu street riot, Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* takes nothing less than World War II, the
Kashmiri wars of 1965 and 1971, the jihadist insurrections in Afghanistan and the Philippines, and the 9/11 attacks into its narrative orbit. Where Naipaul’s fictive world contracts into the immediate experiences of his characters in the capital’s suburbs, Rushdie’s expands to encompass an entire century of global conflicts.

This approach reveals Rushdie’s view of the broad, universal forces of human behavior that govern political affairs throughout all of history. Just as he would make the grand, sweeping claim in Shame that the human forces of shamelessness and shame amount to “meteorological conditions” that cause human violence, which has been an historical constant regardless of particulars, so too Rushdie would have his readers see all particular instances of violence as minute components of a grand historical pattern unfolding over time. While instances of violence recur in certain times and places (and indeed Rushdie was the embattled focus of one such case, with the Iranian fatwa unleashed upon him for The Satanic Verses), these can all be seen in the context of human behavior, and human passions, that don’t ever change. Thus, all of human history can be seen as a sublime object, comprehensible only when viewed abstractly, at its most distant and general. This is the only sense of order that postmodern fiction provides structurally—the hint that there really is, or might be, deeper interlocking patterns beneath the myriad particularities and contingencies that govern human affairs across history, and that these multiple coexisting worlds are part of an ur-world that we can only view, or sense, from a distance. In this sense, postmodernism yearns for the “master narrative” of modernism, but cannot wholly believe in it as a foregone truth. Yet, in the passage above, Ophuls is gripped with doubt as to whether his discovery of “likeness in
the unlike” could actually clarify the world, or delude himself into thinking that such clarification is possible. This is the underlying conundrum in much of postmodern fiction.

Among the range of postcolonial voices in fiction, Salman Rushdie is at the opposite end of the field from Naipaul stylistically and ideologically. Rushdie was born in Bombay at the dawn of Indian independence in 1947, and moved to England to study in his mid-teens while his Muslim family moved to Pakistan. Rushdie’s move to England seems to be happier than Naipaul’s; where Naipaul despaired of gaining a sense of belonging anywhere in the world, Rushdie eventually embraced the idea of multi-rootedness, being both English and Indian at once, a citizen of a hybrid, multicultural society whose identity is in a natural state of perpetual flux. These starkly contrasting viewpoints on cultural hybridity and migration ring out in the fiction as well: where Naipaul’s characters despaired of finding a home among the wreckage of postcolonial society—both in the postcolonial nations themselves and in the metropolitan world—Rushdie embraces this flux and dislocation, which is reflexive for postmodern writers. Both writers realize that nostalgic notions of well-ordered, peaceful societies before colonialism are political myths, and know that any society or culture was never cut from one cloth, but is the result of myriad contingent historical factors. The difference is that Naipaul sees this cultural mixing and global migration as cause for despair—alienation is the way of the world, and most of the world’s peoples can never know a true homeland of their own. Rushdie, by contrast, sees this global diaspora as providing the conditions for brilliantly creative energies to be released. Rushdie is optimistic about the effects of global migration: what immigrants lack in settled homelands they gain from worldly experience and cultural production cross-fertilized by interactions with other cultures.
In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale says that postmodern fiction must imitate the actual texture of contemporary life in the late twentieth century, with the attendant fears of mass annihilation from natural disaster, nuclear war, and terrorist bombings as part of the buzz of everyday fear. McHale claims that postmodern fiction is mimetic, imitating reality “not so much at the level of its content, which is often manifestly un- or anti-realistic, as at the level of form” (38). Many postmodern novels present us with multiple overlapping worlds in sometimes massive, encyclopedic novels. In the sense that postmodern novels like Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* or Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day* present multiple plot lines, involving hundreds of characters, most of whom never meet in the world that the authors present us with, such novels are rigorously realistic in their view of the way the world works. The millennial view that the world is complex, governed by contingency, with certain actions having unforeseen and far-reaching consequences, is represented at the level of narrative form in these postmodern novels.

With magical realism, one of the preeminent postmodern literary techniques, a view of “realism” very different from modernism’s psychological realism is presented. Rushdie has been labeled a magical realist throughout most of his career due to his conspicuous incorporation of supernatural, fantasy elements into otherwise realistic settings. Instead of serving as a fantasy device that disavows or escapes from real-existing conditions, though, magical realism has important political utility for Rushdie, as for many of its pioneering authors like Toni Morrison, Gabriel García Márquez, Günter Grass, and Milan Kundera. For these authors, who come from backgrounds of conflict and oppression, or who address such conflicts in their fiction, their fictive redescription of reality through magical realism is an inherently political act with political
consequences. Rushdie stated in his essay “Imaginary Homelands” that people of opposing political commitments are really in conflict over which competing descriptions of reality to transmit to a wider public. Thus, for Rushdie, “redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it” (qtd. in Reder 13-14). The novelist is then charged with this momentous political task, as “the novel is one way of denying the official, politicians’ version of the truth” (ibid. 14). Rushdie claimed that the fantasy elements in his novels are “only enabling devices to talk about actuality” (ibid. 18). Rushdie celebrates the opportunities for fictive correction into politicized distortions of reality. In his 1984 essay “Outside the Whale,” a direct response to Orwell’s insistence that fiction should refrain from engaging with the political events of the time in his 1940 essay “Inside the Whale,” Rushdie urged that “there is a genuine need for political fiction, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world” (Imaginary Homelands 100). Furthermore, Rushdie stated that “[t]here is no consensus about reality between, for example, the nations of the North and of the South. What President Reagan says is happening in Central America differs so radically from, say, the Sandinista version, that there is almost no common ground” (ibid.). Thus, for Rushdie it is imperative that literature “enter such arguments, because what is being disputed is nothing less than what is the case, what is truth and what untruth” (ibid.).

With this charge for literature to reinterpret political events, there’s nothing that Rushdie says about fiction here that a writer like Naipaul would necessarily disagree with. However, where Rushdie’s view of what he calls “realistic” fiction differs from Naipaul’s is with Rushdie’s use of magical realism to serve these political purposes. For
the aforementioned magical realist writers, the magical elements function as metaphors for actual political figures, movements, events, and situations. Thus, the symbolic function of these characters is conspicuously foregrounded, and a correct interpretation would draw the correlation between the metaphors and the concepts, people, and events that Rushdie intends them to represent.

Rushdie’s postmodern approach to violence, then, presents the violent act, even when central to the narrative, from multiple angles while commenting upon it in the light of multiple discourses, in often comic and parodic ways. Linda Hutcheon claims that postmodern fiction “gives equal value to the self-reflexive and the historically grounded, to that which is inward-directed and belongs to the world of art (such as parody) and that which is outward-directed and belongs to ‘real life’ (such as history)” (2)—that is, equal value to the private and the public realms. Hutcheon calls magical realism postmodernism’s pre-eminent form of storytelling, which gives “recourse to representation of non-combatants or victims of history,” allowing them to “subvert hierarchical order” (47). Here, Hutcheon says that parody “underlines through irony the realization that all cultural forms of representation—literary, visual, aural—in high art or mass media are ideologically grounded” (3). Thus, Hutcheon claims that “[p]ostmodern art is essentially political in the sense that its representations—images and stories—are anything but neutral, however aestheticized they may appear to be in their parodic self-reflexivity” (ibid.). For Rushdie, parody through cinematic, often cartoonish caricature is another mode of realism, capturing an indelible aspect of representation in everyday life saturated by multimedia advertisements. Rushdie employs this technique liberally in all of his novels ranging back to 1981’s *Midnight’s Children.*
For Rushdie, as for many other magical-realist authors, their characters can be seen to serve as metaphors for broader societal forces, whose actions in the narrative function symbolically. The use of such metaphors allows Rushdie to express what he calls the “not-so-improbable improbables” which, he says, are only “about half a step further from what actually happens” (qtd. in Brooks 62). Rushdie cites a conversation-in-letters between Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, in which Brecht insisted that realism is “whatever you have to do in order to describe what you see.” Here, Brecht insisted, “if that involved golden angels coming from underneath mountains, then that’s realism” (ibid.). “Realism is whatever it takes,” Rushdie insists; “[t]o be metaphorical does not mean that you cease to be realistic” (ibid.). In Shame, for example, Sufiya Zinobia is the mentally underdeveloped daughter of General Raza Hyder (whom Rushdie modeled on the actual president of Pakistan, Zia al-Haq, who also took power in the late 1970s by military coup). However, Sufiya has the supernatural power to absorb the repressed shame of those she comes in contact with, transforming into a four-legged monster with the body of a lion, rampaging through the streets and slaughtering anyone who crosses her path. In this way, Sufiya functions as a metaphor for the public violence that frequently erupts in Pakistan, a reaction to the people’s repressed shame at the religious and governmental hypocrisy that Rushdie sees as endemic during Zia’s regime.

Some critiques of Rushdie’s magical realism claim that the technique problematically aestheticizes the actual violence to which it’s referring. For example, Michael Gorra claims that “[h]owever entrancing—indeed, precisely because it is entrancing—Rushdie’s style distances one from the horrors it describes, making his description of them not only bearable but even enjoyable; it keeps one from being
disturbed by the things that happen to his characters” (145). Furthermore, for Gorra, Rushdie’s characters seem “cartoonishly overdetermined, and not simply because they’re handcuffed to history’s crude ironies”; Gorra claims that the totalitarian world of the India of *Midnight’s Children*, for example, is replicated by the seemingly totalitarian control that Rushdie as author exerts upon his characters (ibid.). Ignoring the fact that any author exerts life-or-death control over his or her characters, this overdetermination of his characters’ fates by political circumstances seems to be exactly Rushdie’s point. These forces are inescapable and determine our lives like any cosmic, mystical force in romances and fantasy tales. What these magical elements don’t do, though, is allow the reader to see directly how people’s lives are actually affected *internally* by political events in any sort of introspective, psychological sense. The politically discerning reader would have to make an interpretive leap beyond that required to decipher the metaphors to uncover the actual feelings and emotions that the characters experience, emotions which play out explicitly in the psychological realism of modernist fiction. Rushdie never provides us with the intense modernist character study of a central protagonist whose anguish and moral struggles are expressed earnestly in the book. It is Naipaul’s psychologically realistic focus on Jimmy Ahmed’s torment—both that which he experiences and that which he inflicts—that serves as the basis for terror in an immediate sense in *Guerillas*. In Rushdie, then, the terror must be taken abstractly, through several frames of reference, and without the intense gaze of only one or a few characters to intensify the terror.

*Shalimar the Clown* is Rushdie’s attempt, then, at creating a postmodern, postcolonial epic that draws a direct connection between centuries of intertribal, sectarian
conflict in Kashmir with Islamist international terrorism in the early twenty-first century. This linking of 1,500 years of history, from Kashmiri migrations to life in contemporary Los Angeles, is Rushdie’s province. At its core, the novel tells the story of a love relationship turned to hate, and the jilted husband’s lifelong quest for revenge. Yet, that story inevitably takes on explicitly political dimensions that are represented metaphorically at the level of the characters. Yet, in *Shalimar the Clown*, the roots of the central conflict are clearly personal. The central plot concerns two young lovers in a mountain village in Kashmir: the Muslim Shalimar and the Hindu Boonyi. The two were betrothed to be married, until a U.S. State Department official, Max Ophuls, lures Boonyi away, thus igniting Shalimar’s all-consuming hatred of them both and his vow to kill them and their child. Shalimar’s rage gets channeled to political forms of violence as he joins a radical Islamist militia in Kashmir led by the “iron mullah” Bulbul Fakh. Shalimar becomes an agent of death, killing people upon command without regard for their religious or political affiliation. The jihadist religious charge that the iron mullah gives him only buttresses his obsession, but Shalimar’s rage presupposes his religious fervor. In this sense, Shalimar for Rushdie represents all young Muslim men who join radical Islamist causes for personal reasons, but reasons which are at their root personal reactions to the sociopolitical conditions that determine their lives. Shalimar embodies the nihilism that Rushdie sees informing all radical sectarian causes, a nihilism that is borne both out of religious fervor and personal pathology. In this sense, Islamism is like all other mass movements—a view shared by many post-9/11 political commentators like Paul Berman and Martin Amis.
On the one hand, most of the novel’s action, and indeed its most personal moments, are staged in the town of Pachigam in the mountains of Kashmir, a place where Hindus and Muslims have managed to coexist up to the time that the sectarian conflicts in the novel erupt. Rushdie paints the social intrigues of the town in lurid detail, but the events of the town, especially the forbidden marriage between the Muslim Shalimar and the Hindu Boonyi, immediately take on far broader geopolitical significance when Boonyi leaves Shalimar and the town for the American ambassador Ophuls. Indeed, the geopolitical significance of the events in *Shalimar the Clown* are drawn far more explicitly than those in any of Naipaul’s novels. In Rushdie’s novel, the guerillas actually gain fervent followers, capture towns, and expand and network around the world. If Naipaul’s terrorism is limited to the immediate environs of the people involved, and can only accomplish anything through brutal murder and petty destruction of property, Rushdie’s terrorism in *Shalimar the Clown* reaches far beyond, fomenting in bases in Kashmir and Afghanistan, metastasizing and striking anywhere in the world. Rushdie takes this global reach of terrorism for granted in his novels—he is much more hip about technology and media than Naipaul is in esteemng the worldwide reach of terror.  

Rushdie’s explanation and contextualization of the violence that Shalimar commits in the novel divests the phobic object of each killing of its power to terrify. Each murder, which for Shalimar takes the form of a decapitation with a long knife, does not function as a primal site of horror. Instead, each murder is depicted poetically (when Shalimar beheads Max Ophuls outside of his L.A. condo, the first murder depicted in the novel, the job is done as clean and precise as the beheading of a “hallal chicken”) and serves as occasion for glib political commentary. One of Shalimar’s first murders-for-hire
was of a subversive novelist condemned to death for his blasphemy against Islam. Shalimar is told that the writer is “a godless man, a writer against God, who spoke French and had sold his soul to the West” (274). For Shalimar, “[t]hat was all he needed to know. He should not need to ask questions.” (It’s tempting to think that Rushdie wrote this out of a sly sense of masochistic mirth.) Shalimar, though, takes his bloodlust much further than the mere instrumentality of the assassination he was about to commit: “he wanted to know what it would feel like when he placed the blade of his knife against the man’s skin, when he pushed the sharp and glistening horizon of the knife against the frontier of the skin, violating the sovereignty of another human soul, moving in beyond taboo, toward the blood. What it would feel like when he slashed the bastard’s throat in half so that his head lolled back and sideways off his neck and the blood gushed upwards like a tree. What it would feel like when the blood poured over him and he stepped away from the corpse, the useless twitching thing, the piece of fly-blown meat” (274-75). Compared to Naipaul’s elided description of Jimmy and Bryant’s hacking of Jane, Rushdie gives the assault full literary gloss. Shalimar’s handler, though furious at this blatant violation of the terms in which the assassination was to be done (by a pistol with silencer, not by decapitation), sums up the situation ironically: “[f]or a man like you, a complete fucking crazy asshole, there will always be plenty of work.” (275). The tone of this passage is almost glib with its pithy truism that psychopaths will always be able to find gainful employment. Rushdie tends to tie up lucid passages with witticisms like this, rendering otherwise violent scenes as vignettes whose irony can be taken with humor, rather than terror. This wry humor, wrapping up an otherwise gruesome act of violence as if by cinematic cutting, relativizes the act altogether. Others will be able to use Shalimar’s
psychotic proclivities to their advantage; Shalimar’s violence may defy social order, but it can be channeled for others’ political objectives. This vignette, the act’s intensity deflected in the end through cynical humor, operates as political commentary upon the market for contract killers. The statement bears its own truth on a political level, but it effaces emotional intensity, the horror of the actual act.

When the massacre of the town of Pachigam actually occurs, Rushdie gives full panoramic scope to the violence through a series of concrete but fleeting images. In a masterful synopsis of the destruction of Pachigam by the Indian army, Rushdie artfully elides the actual violence done with just a few fleeting and suggestive images. He insists: “What happened that day in Pachigam need not be set down here in full detail, because brutality is brutality and excess is excess and that’s all there is to it” (309); that “[t]here are things that must be looked at indirectly because they would blind you if you looked at them in the face, like the fire of the sun. So, to repeat: there was no Pachigam anymore. Pachigam was destroyed. Imagine it for yourself” (ibid). Yet, he helps us imagine what actually happened regardless in providing snapshots of the gruesome details: “Who lit that fire? Who burned that orchard? Who shot those brothers who laughed their whole lives long? Who killed that sarpanch? Who broke his hands? Who broke his arms? Who broke his ancient neck? … Who shot those boys? Who shot those girls? Who smashed that house? Who smashed that house? Who smashed that house? … Who raped that lazy-eyed woman? Who raped that grey-haired lazy-eyed woman as she screamed about snake vengeance? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that dead woman? Who raped that dead woman again?” (308). At the level of narrative, Rushdie himself is the “who” that enacts the violence,
materializing the events that he feigns at first to refuse to tell with his disclaimer that they “need not be set down in detail” as if Twain actually did reveal scenes of the massacre of the Shepherdsons and Grangerfords in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that Huck covered over as “things” that he won’t ever “get shut of.” This cinematic, stream-of-consciousness view of war atrocities is as graphic an account of violence as Rushdie has ever given. The references to the lethal rape of an old woman imbue the violence with such phobic objects, which correlate objectively to the horror of such atrocities. Yet the images stream by cinematically, and Rushdie mediates these as if by film mélange.

What Rushdie does not provide us with, though, is a convincing account of Shalimar, his killer-protagonist’s psychological life. Shalimar’s emotions and motives for vengeance are given in only the most abstract terms. When Shalimar stalks the defenseless Boonyi, waiting for the moment when he could kill her, he reflects that she would be as defenseless “as his life had been defenseless when she ruined it, defenseless and vulnerable just as his heart had once been, defenseless and vulnerable and fragile just like his shattered capacity for trust” (241). We are in the realm of popular psychology here. Shalimar’s life-defining revenge, which is the ultimate thrust of the novel’s plot, is his singled-minded adherence to an oath he swears that he would kill Boonyi and all her children if she ever left him. Shalimar once vents his rage over the political situation in Kashmir, piling on obscenities as he rants to his mother: “the men in tanks who hide their faces so that we don’t know their names and the women torturers who are worse than the men and the people made of barbed wire and the people made of electricity whose hands would fry your balls if they grabbed them and the people made of bullets and the people made of lies and they are all here to do something important, namely to fuck us until
Shalimar proclaims that he wishes to kill “the invisible enemy in the invisible room in the foreign country far away” meaning Max Ophuls (ibid.). Yet this outburst is highly stylized, metaphorically driven, and has no precedent for him in the novel. Shalimar goes from being a shy, socially awkward, impressionable boy to a sociopathic killer overnight, and Rushdie does not elaborate on the psychological transformation here. With a touch of magical realism, Shalimar communicates telepathically with Boonyi as he stalks her: “Everything I do prepares me for you and for him. Every blow I strike, strikes you or him. The people leading us up here are fighting for God or for Pakistan but I am killing because it is what I have become. I have become death” (298). When Shalimar does finally decapitate Boonyi we don’t actually see the act, and we only see Shalimar running down the hillside in tears, but steeled to commit the next murder on his warpath. We’re certainly not caught up in the unrelenting, tormented subjectivity of the killer as with Jimmy Ahmed or Bigger Thomas. What Rushdie presents us with, then, is a truly schizophrenic postmodern protagonist whose thoughts and actions are determined purely by the social and political circumstances surrounding him.

Rushdie acknowledged that his books up through 1988’s *The Satanic Verses* contained “very little stuff at all about the deep emotions.” He said that he considers this to be a weakness in his work: “one of the things I have failed to do, at the center of my work, is write about strong feeling, cathartic emotion, obsession” (qtd. in Gorra 147). Significantly, then, Rushdie has departed in his later works from many of the magical realist techniques that were so conspicuous in the early stages of his career, especially with *Midnight’s Children, Shame*, and *The Satanic Verses*. Indeed, in *Shalimar the
Clown, for all its fantastic accoutrements—Shalimar and Boonyi’s telepathic connection, Shalimar’s apparent ability to walk on air, Shalimar’s shadowy international travels on his terrorist missions—do not dominate the narrative and determine the physics of his fictive world to the extent that they do in his early works. Indeed, the Kashmir and the L.A. of Shalimar the Clown are more or less realistically rendered, though the events therein are extraordinary.

It is with Fury (2001), then, that Rushdie does engage in the deep emotions in detail, and in fact makes these emotions the thematic core of the book, while putting the political world of crime and exile and revolution in the background. Fury is a stark departure from Rushdie’s other novels, and presents a non-political core to the violence that becomes political once it enters the public realm. The central theme and metaphor here is “fury” in all its forms—an emotion that can erupt for any number of reasons. The novel’s protagonist Malik Solanka reflects that “[l]ife is fury, he’d thought. Fury—sexual, Oedipal, political, magical, brutal—drives us to our finest heights and coarsest depths. Out of furia comes creation, inspiration, originality, passion, but also violence, pain, pure unafraid destruction, the giving and receiving of blows from which we never recover” (30-31). Throughout the novel Solanka lives in fear of the “terrorist anger that kept taking him hostage” (67)—anger that the reader learns at the very end is due to his own deep-rooted personal trauma. The root causes of terror in Fury are uncontrolled human passions, which have no exact political coordinates—the very universal forces that Rushdie urges us to fear. As Rushdie claimed in the passage from Shame, the passions of shamelessness and shame are the sources of all violence, and undergird all human affairs regardless of particulars. Naipaul would agree with this long view, and
indeed he populates his novels with characters who all feel similar feelings of rage and shame as Rushdie’s. However, Naipaul takes pains to illustrate the material conditions that engendered this rage. The inward turn that Rushdie took in *Fury* amounts to his most direct engagement with psychological realism in his fiction, a technique that was always reflexive for Naipaul.

*Fury* is Rushdie’s most direct and intimate analysis of personal trauma that influences political action. Except for Rushdie’s evoking of the winged Furies of Greek mythology who figuratively pursue Solanka to the end, Rushdie does not employ the supernatural trappings of his earlier magical realist works, and his novel is firmly grounded in the objective world. The driving incident in the novel’s background is Solanka’s gesture to kill his own young son, as Solanka hovers over the sleeping boy with a steak knife after one particular evening of fighting with his wife. Solanka’s horrified response to this narrowly averted violence is to flee London, where he lived with his family, to take up refuge in New York City, where he is free to pursue his own pleasures away from the restraining responsibilities to his family, to whom he has now become a danger. What is revealed at novel’s end is that Solanka was himself the victim of repeated sexual abuse by his stepfather during Solanka’s childhood in India—Rushdie suggests that this is the horrific source of Solanka’s fury throughout the book.

While Solanka’s threatened violence was domestic and not publicly political, a similar case of child abuse leads both parties to pursue expressly political causes. Solanka intuits that his erstwhile lover Mila Milo, a younger woman who fled with her father to the U.S. from Serbia, was also abused by her father. Solanka supposes that the guilt from this experience is the death-drive that drove her father, a poet who ranted against
Milosevic in his former homeland, to move back to Serbia, where he was promptly blown up by a landmine. In her father’s absence Mila then takes up the cause of recruiting and training the Webspyders, her own legion of troubled young men in New York to hack into computer systems and create their own computer programs that would compete with Bill Gates’s own at the underground level. Both of these figures, and Solanka himself, compulsively seek out other distractions that would free them from the consuming fury over these horrific personal traumas. This fury would be a life-destroying force if unleashed, and the avoidance of dealing with the traumas is a matter of avoiding representation of the sources of pain itself: “The matter of allowing oneself to be. Of having no choice but. Of the slavery of childhood when. Of need: this one’s that one’s most inexorable. Of the power of doctors to. Of the child’s impotence in the face of. Of the innocence of children in. Of the child’s guilt, its fault, its most grievous fault. Above all the matter of sentences that must never be completed, because to complete them would release the fury, and the crater of that explosion would consume everything at hand” (135). This stream-of-consciousness elision of the horrific act of the abuse, and avoidance of engaging with the primal scene directly, points to Rushdie’s fleet of cinematic glimpses of wartime violence in describing the destruction of Pachigam in Shalimar the Clown, only the language is even more halting and stilted. Mallarmé said that “[t]o name is to destroy” (qtd. in Kenner 199), but he was referring to the power of language to destroy the thing represented in fiction when it is spelled out too literally. Rushdie, in the above quote, means the opposite: to name is to unleash the literal traumatic event upon the subject. The power of words becomes appallingly real for the trauma survivor here. Thus, in Shalimar the Clown, Rushdie offers to erase the disturbing
images of the massacre by offering the disclaimer that follows them: “[t]here are things that must be looked at indirectly because they would blind you if you looked at them in the face, like the fire of the sun. So, to repeat: there was no Pachigam anymore. Pachigam was destroyed. Imagine it for yourself” (309).

What Rushdie does with *Fury*, then, is take an inward turn in figuring the sources of violence. In the simplest terms, it was Solanka’s shame at his own abuse that caused him to threaten his son’s life. This shame seems like a reflexive modernist approach, then, in conveying turbulent emotions through psychological realism. This does seem like a departure from his other magical-realist works, and Rushdie acknowledged as much when he said that none of the other novels have “dealt with the deep emotions” as much as he attempted to do with *Fury*. If the impersonal, “meteorological conditions” of shamelessness and shame drive violence throughout human history, Rushdie here shows the locus of shame at its most personal, with all the other events in the novel, as we see retrospectively, proceeding from there. However, the exploration of Solanka’s victimization in *Fury* comes only at the end of the novel, and while causally central to the novel’s events, the trauma’s effects are played out throughout the entire book in a dazzlingly vertiginous New York City of the new millennium. Yet, with this intense exploration of Solanka’s trauma, the terror can be taken more purely, without the figurative clothing of magical realism. This is the same inward turn that drives modernist fiction, where Rushdie at least heeds the terror of words and their power to devastate in naming the violence directly, which is the modernist credo—the need to explain “what hurts.”
In *The Vehement Passions*, Philip Fisher claimed that for literary study, “the passions are not important mainly as momentary situations within works” but rather the passions of “wonder, pity, mourning, fear, anger, grief, and shame legislate what we mean by genre and by form in many of the most profound and culturally important works that we have” (11). In Linda Hutcheon’s formulation, the difference between modernism’s question of “what hurts” and postmodernism’s of “what we say once hurt” aptly sums up the differing approaches that Naipaul and Rushdie take to violence in their fiction. Hutcheon claims that postmodern critique “acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine” (4). Therefore, the postmodern critique is “complicit with power and domination” (ibid.). Modernism, by contrast, does seek a way out from that system, and clamors to find that exit, or to create one of its own, through its own ordered systems.

The despair that is so palpable in Naipaul’s works is reminiscent of a classical sort of modernist alienation, where the thinking, feeling (and male) subject strives to find order and self-sufficiency amidst the wreckage of his social ideals, but fails to do so. However, Naipaul is enmeshed in the postmodern, postcolonial world of the wretched of the earth, a world much closer to that of Bigger Thomas than of Jake Barnes. All of Naipaul’s metropolitan peers could be made to share a sense of the guilt of imperialist or neoimperialist exploitation of the people Naipaul grew up with or traveled among. Therefore, Naipaul uses his fiction to instill that guilt, showing the pain that oppression had caused, in creating monsters that Western liberals might desire to champion, at their own risk. “Hate oppression, but fear the oppressed,” as Naipaul summed it up. In this sense, modernist fiction is more politically activist than postmodern fiction.
The postmodern world that Rushdie presents us in his novels, then, offers the hope of finding familiarity—a place we can find home and completeness—amidst the daunting complexity. In this sense, Rushdie’s fiction might very well be complicit with the objectives of neoliberalism, in making us complacent within the state of society with all of its systemic abuses. For Rushdie, the political violence that flares up is all part of the grand pattern, just as there have always been wars and revolutions throughout history. Rushdie takes the long view here, urging us to analyze these cases for what they are, relative to one another. Naipaul is rooted in the immediate present of his characters, then: poised to kill, to raise the cutlass, and to fall into the pit of despair once the blood rush runs out. In this modernist view, postcolonial violence is truly terrifying.
CHAPTER 4

The Curious Knot:

Cyber-Capital, Terrorism, and Art’s Third Way in DeLillo’s Millennial Novels

What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous. (157)

–Bill Gray, *Mao II*

We always love the things in art that we hate in life.

–Don DeLillo in a letter to Christian Messenger, 1979

On September 16, 2001, at a news conference in Hamburg, composer Karlheinz Stockhausen called the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center that had occurred less than a week earlier, “the greatest possible work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos” (qtd. in Lentricchia 5). Stockhausen went on to speak of the hijackers’ achievements, claiming that they did “something in one act” that “we couldn’t even dream of in music,” in which “people practice like crazy for ten years, totally fanatically for a concert, and then die.” He continued: “You have people so concentrated on one performance, and then 5,000 people are dispatched into eternity, in a single moment” (6-7). “I couldn’t do that,” Stockhausen concluded; “[i]n comparison with that, we’re nothing as composers” (7). These comments unleashed the furor that could be expected from seemingly insensitive comments made within a week after a major public catastrophe. Stockhausen instantly entered the infamous company of political firebrands of the moment like Susan Sontag, Noam Chomsky, and Ward Churchill, who cited the attacks as the perfect case in point for how far America’s neoimperialist domination had pushed the wretched of the earth against us. These commentators were roundly condemned for posturing at the expense of the misery of their fellow citizen-victims, and
for speaking of the hijackers with what seemed, disturbingly, like admiration. With his quote, though, Stockhausen took perhaps the strangest approach that any public commentary had made on the attacks in likening the devastation to a *symphony*.

In a follow-up press conference a few days later, Stockhausen tried to qualify his remarks. “In my work,” Stockhausen said, “I have defined Lucifer as the cosmic spirit of rebellion, of anarchy. He uses his high degree of intelligence to destroy creation….I used the designation ‘work of art’ to mean the work of destruction personified in Lucifer” (9). The attacks, then, evoke Stockhausen’s artistic conception of the rebel-as-artist, whose archetype he figures as Lucifer, whose own destructive acts—violently negating all that came before—serve as a form of “art” in themselves. Stockhausen made sure to qualify this statement, though, in claiming that 9/11’s extreme destructive form of art is “criminal” because its human victims did not have a choice in being killed as they were. However, he asserted: “what happened spiritually, this jump out of security, out of the self-evident, out of everyday life, this sometimes also happens in art…or it is worthless” (9). By degree of intensity, then, the destruction of the Twin Towers, viewed as a concerted performance, achieved a radical transformation of consciousness, a “spiritual” experience if only for a moment, for which Stockhausen sees all true artists as aspiring to some degree.

Can we take seriously, then, this equating of a spectacular act of destructive violence with a work of art in terms of its impact upon a viewing audience’s consciousness? The equation immediately breaks down when one thinks about the physics, the instrumentality of both forms of “violence” here. The instrument of the *physical* act of violence is the weapon—the bomb, nails, bullet, knife—which is used
actively upon another person. By contrast, the instrument of the intellectual act of violence is the text, the painting, or the film, which by definition is viewed passively, by an audience who may simply choose not to look. An act of violence is visited upon a person most often without that person’s choice, and the disturbance the person feels from being assaulted is immediate and monological (i.e., pain). Can art, however disturbing it’s intended to be, also be considered to affect a person in the same way given that art, by its very nature, is passive and depends upon its being viewed by an audience that simply can turn away?

What can we make of Stockhausen’s claim, then, that terrorism can be equated with art at some philosophical level? Does the terrorist really strive to change public consciousness with the same objective as the composer or novelist? Certainly many, if not most, novelists, seek to change people’s perspectives in some aesthetic or didactic sense. Undeniably, some novelists write with expressly political motives, in seeking to expose the hidden contradictions in a political situation, which Joseph Conrad showed in his novels of Edwardian-era radicalism and statecraft or V.S. Naipaul in his novels of the repressed rage of dispossessed postcolonial drifters that can only explode in frightening but impotent violence. On the other hand, some novelists expressly intend to inspire readers, compelling them to pursue political action, taking a more didactic or polemical approach, such as the many American and British leftist writers of the 1930s. These were the expressly ideological writers whose “awfulness” of “serious purpose,” in George Orwell’s view, gave politically oriented fiction in the 1930s its unique character (see Chapter 2 herein).
What does it mean, then, in the twenty-first century, to still take seriously the claims that art can shock and terrify, and somehow effect political change, when most of the bourgeois and proletarian world has become habituated to sensational TV and Internet news and images? Does the instantaneous and worldwide dissemination of news and images, often without any original context, decrease the power of the act or the image for a worldwide audience altogether, or does it increase the power and range of these acts and images by making them ubiquitous? Popular fiction sells more than ever before in a global market, but how can anyone claim that a novel, or any form of art, can impact mass consciousness in a world in which art is instantly commodified and disposable? What does it mean that in 2001 a postmodern composer becomes artistically enthralled by the idea of massive, “real-life” physical destruction as the most extreme form of art, towards which his work can only aspire? In the first decade of the twenty-first century, has art finally exhausted its transformative potential, or has it always flirted with acts of pure destruction as its death-drive?

Don DeLillo, perhaps more than any other late-twentieth-century novelist, writes about terrorism and other mass-media phenomena while at the same time contemplating his own powers and limitations as an artist. DeLillo makes the reflexive postmodern move throughout his entire career of conspicuously questioning the power of the novel as a form of cultural critique. Granted, all of DeLillo’s works address questions of the capitalist appropriation of forms of resistance—whether political or artistic—as well as the symbiotic relationship between regime power and political resistance. However, once DeLillo gained fame and fortune as a novelist in the mid-1980s (and virtual canonization as one of the world’s premier living novelists from the 1990s on), he could no longer
claim to speak with an outsider’s voice in critiquing multinational capitalism. DeLillo, though, has never lost his edge for political criticism through his novels, and he still persists in promoting the idea that the novelist can function as a powerful shaper of public consciousness.

Granted, DeLillo has always referenced brand names and consumer goods, cults of celebrities, and their often-stultifying affect upon masses of consumers throughout his career. The ubiquity of the Internet and its massive flows of capital that have enmeshed every corner of the world have caused DeLillo to sharpen his critique of capitalism even further. In his turn-of-the-millennium works, then, DeLillo uses the term “cyber-capital” to refer to the general condition of late postmodernity, where all activities, appetites, behaviors, desires, and entertainments can be instantly commodified. Escape from cyber-capital seems impossible, and rebellion seems futile. Yet, throughout the world there are always possible forms of resistance and rebellion, both violent and artistic, and these agents have always captivated DeLillo. In the fourteen years spanning *Underworld* (1996) through *Omega Point* (2010), the two modes of resistance against cyber-capital that concern DeLillo most are terrorism and performance art. DeLillo sees both terrorist violence and radical forms of art as means of launching spontaneous assaults on people’s consciousnesses in ways that novelists cannot do as readily, or as viscerally. By different means, but in theoretically similar ways, both terrorists and performance artists use their power to shock, which they believe defies attempts to incorporate their actions into the circuits of cyber-capital.

If art seeks to startle and disturb, then it must have something in it that evokes terror in the viewer or reader. As I have discussed in previous chapters, this is the *phobic object*, that
which atavistically conveys terror in a person or people who share certain cultural meanings. The phobic object can be anything that terrifies for any reason, but the meaning of this object is often culturally determined. The power of certain phobic objects to terrify may very well shift with time, and unpredictably so; what’s terrifying for certain people of one particular culture or society in one particular time and place may not be for another. As I will show, various forms of representative and performance art rely on the phobic object contained therein to evoke terror in an audience. DeLillo realized this, and was fascinated by various forms of performance art as the most immediate and impactful means for shocking an audience. In DeLillo’s view, if art is to do anything shocking for its public, it must be spontaneous, unmediated, and conveyed through physical performance. In this sense, as DeLillo sees it, art can, in a very limited sense, terrorize in the same way that terrorism does, but with possibly regenerative effects.

However, performance art, just as with terrorism, still has infinitely contingent and unpredictable effects, which may in their reception by their audience be at total odds with the agent’s original intentions. In the end, the performance artist can only gesture at a form of art that transcends capitalist appropriation, and ultimately cannot escape the same circuits of power within cyber-capital that terrorism cannot escape. Even the most extreme forms of performance art, as epitomized in DeLillo’s definitive post-9/11 novel *Falling Man*, are divested of their power to shock once they become mediatized. Both terrorism and performance art rely on the spectacle, which evokes fear and shock even while it may compel the audience to think deeper on the underlying message and the cause of the agents’ outrage. However, as I will show, the shock of the spectacle overwhelms all, and ultimately distances the viewer from the message at hand. DeLillo critiques the power of the spectacle to relieve its audience of the need to think and reflect. Therefore, the novel ends up supplying the critique and guiding its audience’s
interpretations in ways that performance art cannot. For DeLillo, the truly lasting artistic statements are those that compel their audience to think deeply and reflect—this is art’s only way to make a political statement in the world of cyber-capital.

The core text of this chapter, the critique of which I will build up to, is DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, which DeLillo fashioned as a device for representing the experience of trauma in the tumultuous years following 9/11. DeLillo crafted the narrative to recreate the experience of trauma experienced by some of the 9/11 victims themselves. Yet the central figure in the novel is the book’s namesake, the performance artist Falling Man, the novel’s true terrorist. While Falling Man’s staged jumps from multi-story buildings seek to traumatically recapitulate some of the most shocking and widely reproduced images of the 9/11 attacks, in his attempt to reopen the raw wound of 9/11 for spectators, his message is lost on all but one viewer. DeLillo fashions his own novel to do the work of the performance artist, but without relying on the unstable and unpredictable power of the spectacle. Contrary to the main current of critique of *Falling Man*, I contend that DeLillo does not intend to offer comfort to the survivors, giving readers a therapeutic means of coming to terms with the catastrophe as it has ruptured their lives. Indeed, DeLillo does not offer such resolution in any of his novels; rather, he tries to unsettle his readers while thwarting any expectations of a tidy conclusion. In this way, DeLillo retains his faith in the novel as the most circumspect means of offering full commentary and critique upon all forms of activism—terroristic and artistic—without offering redemptive, idealistic hopes of triumph or resolution through either. This stance has its political implications, then, as it ultimately implicates Western capitalism for creating the conditions that spawn and perpetuate terrorism in the first place. In DeLillo’s terrorism novels, killers and victims all swim together in collective guilt and collective trauma, and one is indistinguishable from the other.
1. The Phobic Object and the Artist/Terrorist Nexus

News of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative. (42)
–Bill Gray, *Mao II*

Any study of twentieth- and twenty-first-century terrorism in fiction must inevitably reckon with Don DeLillo. No postmodern author who can now be considered “canonical” in collegiate literary studies has so prolifically explored the various social and spiritual maladies of postmodern America. His roughly two-dozen novels that span the forty-odd years from 1971 to the present all explore this theme in hundreds of venues, through thousands of characters. Global-scale capitalism creates stunted, spiritually impoverished individuals. Political phenomena, and indeed most every object in the world, are mediated to the extent that their very ontological nature seems determined by the form and extent of the media themselves. Multinational capitalism is antihumanist in its valuations of people merely in terms of their labor and spending power. In all of his novels, then, DeLillo’s characters ruminate self-consciously about various forms of their powerlessness and anomie that they attribute to economic, political, and cultural forces beyond their control. DeLillo’s artists and academics, housewives and businessmen, often put forth perfectly formed philosophical treatises on such topics, serving as mouthpieces for DeLillo’s own ideas. Just as Salman Rushdie can be said to enslave his characters to the political and historical forces into which they’re born, DeLillo often does so with his characters, subjugating them to the socioeconomic forces of late-twentieth-century neoliberalism. Some critics consider DeLillo to be the fictive extension of the deconstructionists, who plays out the deconstructive interrogation of positive,
unmediatized knowledge in the world writ large through his fiction. Others see DeLillo as a neohumanist, who tries to salvage whatever he sees as decent and genuine in human relations from postmodern, neoliberal oblivion.¹ His characters might often act like automata, and speak like philosophers or psychiatrists, but they undeniably feel their own and each other’s pain. Attention to extreme states of depression, grief, guilt, and fear is quite explicit in DeLillo’s works, and most pronounced in his later works from Libra up to Omega Point.

It is important to insist, then, that DeLillo does not simply subscribe to a reductive view of humans as social constructs or products of discourse. His novels all show in often-blinding intricacy the complex web of interrelated, overlapping systems that influence every one of his character’s actions, and bring the final, often catastrophic convergence of events together in ways that seem anything but inevitable. There are all sorts of contingent factors at play in the world and DeLillo cautions against reductive plots and schemas to order them. “Plots reduce the world,” he claimed in his essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” in that those who understand the world through simplifying schemas alone condemn themselves to “a certain kind of apartness, hard and tight” (34). This applies as much to Nicholas Branch, the historian engaged in the labyrinthine task of finding the master plot behind the JFK assassination in Libra, as it does to Hammad, the 9/11 hijacker who finds camaraderie and purpose among the religious fanatics who recruit him in Falling Man. For DeLillo, as is the case for the other authors I discuss in this dissertation, the novel is uniquely equipped to probe into terrorism, in exploring through fiction the complexities of discourse, and critiquing the artifices of narrative, in ways that non-fictive discourses may not.
Public fear is DeLillo’s binding theme across his entire corpus, and he goes to
great lengths to expose the imaginative work of constructing fictive plots to validate and
manage this fear. In considering the scope of the forty years of DeLillo’s career, he has
seen one locus of paranoia—the Cold War-era fear of communists—replaced by
another—the post-Cold War–era fear of terrorists. As did many Cold War-era analysts,
DeLillo saw the terrorism of Third World peoples as epiphenomena of the Cold War
itself, inextricably bound up in the global battles and intrigues between the U.S. and
USSR. In *Players*, the terrorists are a CIA-sponsored group of Salvadoran rebels who
plot to blow up the New York Stock Exchange. In *The Names*, the terrorists are a tiny
cult of sign-fetishists who are infiltrated by the CIA, though a terrorism risk-consultant
insists that the entire civilized world is besieged by religious fundamentalists and Marxist
guerillas alike. In *Mao II*, the terrorists are a group of Palestinian Maoists in Lebanon
who resort to bombing and kidnapping Western artists in order to seize the spotlight.
Terrorism scholars Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass observe that “[i]ronically,
the same period in history in which nations have created military weapons systems
capable of destroying humanity itself, a holocaust that could be triggered by a
technological error, is also the one that creates the figure of the loathsome Terrorist intent
on nothing but random killing” (148). The apocalypse in the postmodern world can come
from anywhere, at any time, in any package—either from above (nuclear missiles) or
below (terrorist subway bombings). In his post-9/11 essay “In the Ruins of the Future,”
DeLillo points out that “a small group of men have literally altered our skyline. We have
fallen back in time and space. It is their technology that marks our moments, the small
lethal devices, the remote-control detonators they fashion out of radios, or the larger
technology they borrow from us, passenger jets that become manned missiles” (38). The objects most familiar to us have now become potential deadly weapons, even if there was always the threat of “terrorists” among us. The global technological system in which our lives are enmeshed brings about its own unknown horrors that we were never quite prepared to face.

In his *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Timothy Melley explains the postmodern paradox in which Western liberal subjects find their own human autonomy to be constantly undermined by some inscrutable, far-reaching system—whether from the ruling regime or from substate agents. According to Melley, forms of public paranoia enable a “supposedly individualist culture [to] conserve[] its individualism by continually imagining it to be in imminent peril” (6). Granted, public hysteria is not in any sense a distinctly postmodern phenomenon. What *is* unique in the late-twentieth-century Western world, though, is a conspicuous critical awareness of power as a system, a network, a set of rhizomes; this is expounded upon at length in the theoretical works of the poststructuralists, but also explored in DeLillo’s fiction.² There is no master-plotter who controls all details of a terrorist or government plot, per se. DeLillo illustrates this in *Libra*, in which a small group of ex-CIA agents try to stage a deliberately unsuccessful assassination attempt on President Kennedy in order to provoke retaliation against Cuba, using Oswald as their dupe. However, at the same time, a rival team of Cuban refugees trained by other rogue intelligence agents and funded by mafiosi undercut this plot with their own *successful* assassination, unbeknownst to the original plotters. *Libra*’s web of names, possible culprits, and interconnections is daunting, and there is no single criminal mastermind behind it all.
This is starkly opposed to the modernist view of the master plot, which by contrast is coherent and monological. While at first inscrutable, the modernist plot can become clear through some savvy detective work, which is exactly what Libra’s historian Nicholas Branch sets himself to doing, despairingly. Melley usefully claims that the modernist view is, in fact, best called paranoia—the belief that a fully realized self is constantly under attack from another, hidden but fully realizable enemy. This paranoia is opposed to the postmodern view of schizophrenia, the dissociative condition in which there is no coherent, total self possible—one is always composed of many other selves and assaulted by many enemies all around (185-86). This is precisely the contrast between the paranoia that grips Naipaul’s protagonists in his modernist novels and the schizophrenia that suffuses the characters in Rushdie’s postmodernist novels, which I discuss in Chapter 3.

In the world of cyber-capital, when mediatized images can be conveyed through multiple channels to a potentially limitless public, the range of terrorism’s effects are greatly extended. More than any other type of violence, and certainly more than any other form of warfare against a people or a regime, terrorism operates by the dynamic of fear, which gives it a power far disproportionate to its actual ability to harm. Zulaika and Douglass claim that terrorism works by “imposing an apocalyptic frame in which suspension of disbelief appears to be the rational course and no commentary as to its discursive configuration seems relevant” (30). Terrorism acts on a visceral, almost superstitious level with “performative plenitude, the culturally embedded premises of a magical sort of activism” (66), rendering “as if by contagion, single acts of sparse violence into alarming symbolic statements of all-out challenge to the established order” (142-43). Importantly, though, terrorism’s power to terrify depends on the secrecy of its
plotting. When its tricks are exposed, then, when the purely symbolic nature of its acts are seen to be merely symbolic, Zulaika and Douglass claim that terrorism loses its grip on the public imagination.

True, the average citizen of any country has very little chance of being killed in a terrorist attack. In considering the odds, everyone ought to take heart in that fact alone. However, while the actual damage wrought by a bus bomb is relatively slight, the idea that it could affect anyone at any time, and in a very painful way, makes cowards of us all. “Pain and death and madness are ‘feelingly perceived’ in the terrorizing play of human thought itself” when the self is unexpectedly faced with these things, Anthony Kubiak explains in his *Stages of Terror: Terrorism, Ideology, and Coercion as Theatre History* (16). The fear of immanent death, or of physical pain, is powerful and compelling in any situation. “Terrorism is not theatre” as such, Kubiak claims, but terrorism operates through “a terror that is theatre’s moment, a terror that is so basic to human life that it remains largely invisible except as theatre” (2). One can reason away the sociopolitical causes for a killer’s aggression, but that doesn’t make the fact that he holds a gun to your head, or threatens to detonate explosives strapped to his chest, any less horrifying in the moment. In fact, the visceral fear that people held in thrall to such a situation feel makes it virtually impossible to rationalize its causes.

Kubiak claims that terrorism can terrify theatrically when certain “phobic objects” are used to evoke terror in an audience. On one hand, “[t]he real pain inflicted on the body,” Kubiak says, “can never become a sign, can never enter a system of information and exchange” but “remains unsignifiable, unrepresentable” (21). Only the sufferer can really experience the actual pain, and anyone else can only imagine the pain
sympathetically, as conveyed through signs and gestures of suffering that only hint at the real pain that the sufferer experiences. Images of grievous bodily injury, then, serve as phobic objects in this sense—signs that signify the experience which cannot be wholly known to anyone else, but which suggest a pain that the audience can only contemplate sympathetically. This is the theatrical nature of terrorism’s effects upon a broader audience than those who are immediately killed or injured in an attack—the participation in a staged situation by a sympathetic observer who imagines the pain as his own. If terrorism has any power to convey terror at all, it must transmit this emotion through its use of phobic objects, conveyed in a theatrical dynamic. Images of mangled corpses, severed body parts, and ruined buildings can all serve as phobic objects, and may convey terror for certain people who witness these images.

This is a big may, though, and this possibility must only be offered tentatively. Aida Hozic, in her essay “The Inverted World of Spectacle: Social and Political Responses to Terrorism,” critiques the power of violent spectacle to make an audience truly feel the emotion that the actor intended. Instead of bridging the gap between actor and audience, spectacle actually “increases the gap between the actor and audience, between the empowered and the powerless” (68). The audience has an appetite for even the most terrifying of spectacles; thus any spectacle is potentially “a form which pleases the audience,” which may “reduce[] conflict and social tension,” contrary to its actors’ intentions (ibid.). All spectacles with the power to shock are endowed with some form of phobic object (per Kubiak); yet the phobic object may obscure the underlying meaning and intention of the actor’s message. Moreover, Hozic claims that “if something is presented as a spectacle then it is presented in a bearable form” (78). “Instead of seeing
the real death, instead of confronting something dangerous and different, instead of experiencing a real horror, the audience is faced with a far more pleasant substitute” (ibid.).

The cultural fascination with images of power is indicative of a culture that aestheticizes politics rather than engages critically with issues. Throughout his works, DeLillo critiques mass phenomena and the power of the image to impress and captivate an audience that consumes it. In *Mao II*, DeLillo shows that crowds worldwide tend to fetishize images and personalities, endowing them with power and importance beyond all proper context, whether it’s the Reverend Sun Myung Moon conducting a mass wedding in Yankee Stadium or the hysterical crowds pouring over Ayatollah Khomeini’s corpse at his funeral procession. People don’t have to think when they’re caught up in these spectacles; in fact, they’re encouraged not to think. The coordinators of the spectacles use them to exert control over their followers, and the purveyors of these images in mass media use these images as commodities to be instantaneously consumed.

This is the crux of the unstable valence between spectacle that’s conveyed and audience response: the spectacle, whether through photos, TV images, film scenes, etc., may horrify and appall and compel us, but it may entertain us as well. There’s nothing that determines the audience’s response to even the most gruesome spectacle. In *Mao II*, the photojournalist Brita Nilsson complains about her life’s work that “[n]o matter what I shot, how much horror, reality, misery, ruined bodies, bloody faces, it was all so fucking pretty in the end” (24-25). DeLillo summed up his own thoughts on this in claiming “we always love the things in art that we hate in life” in a personal letter he wrote to Christian
Messenger in 1979, more than a decade before he would explore that very idea in detail in *Mao II*.

Any act of public violence can readily be taken out of its original context the more that it’s publicized to a broader audience. We can read of a car bombing in Baghdad half an hour later through a Reuters report on our favorite news website, or revisit stories and images of the 9/11 attacks ten years later, but it’s entirely possible for us to do so without any attention being paid to the original context for the attacks—who the perpetrators were and what their possible logic for the attacks was. “Whenever acts of terrorism of any sort are mediated, causing us to lose sight of the critical, terrorizing impulses that gave them birth,” Kubiak warns that “violence reemerges as a mystifying, disconnected system of signs whose causes and reasons become permanently lost to us” (21). Kubiak claims that when the causes of violence are repressed in public consciousness—i.e., in the ways that public discourse addresses these issues—various other, extraneous forms of cultural violence may continue to erupt years and even decades later, as mass shootings erupt in public places by those who claim to be war-crazed veterans, and as “performance artists and experimental theatres initiated their own explorations into the ethos of violence and self-mutilation in ways that sometimes did more to confuse the issues of violence and theatre than to clarify their relations” (22).

With this example of sadomasochistic performance art, Kubiak crucially links art with violence through the shared use of the phobic object. Performance art’s use of “self-mutilation” is meant to send some sort of message, and serve as some sort of critique, but its immediate effects may seem designed merely for their shock value upon their audience. Where modernist theater at least gave the appearance of individual resistance,
as skeptical as it was of its efficacy, Kubiak claims that postmodern theater in general does not serve as a site of political contestation, despite its radical-seeming forms of resistance. Postmodern theater, in fact, serves a “profoundly hegemonic function—performance’s consolidation with/in the power networks of postindustrial capitalism, networks that operate as the mere appearance of disintegration and fragmentation, that operate, in a word, as theatre itself” (121). For the regime, Kubiak claims that theater serves a conservative purpose, where its forms of performance, recognized by their public audiences as such, can be treated as only that: performance. Moreover, theatrical spectacles that appear to be contestatory are just part of the guile of neoliberalism—our protests merely make us feel like we, or someone, is mounting an effective resistance, but then we all go back to the same conditions we’d been living in all along. Even the most radical-seeming critiques can’t resist commodification by capital; someone is always making money from even the most radical forms of art (or potentially could). Moreover, as has always been the case despite the political dominant, any contestatory claims that theater may make against the regime can be relegated to the theater, apprehended and contained within it. There is nothing that necessarily makes anyone participate or invest themselves in theater at all. One can always choose not to look. Or one may simply not feel the visceral effects that the phobic object was intended to have on that person altogether. The phobic object, when mediated, may have a very short shelf-life indeed.

The lasting power of the phobic object, though, lies in its disarticulation from the sociopolitical coordinates in which it’s inscribed. Decontextualized, the spectacle of pain can be powerful indeed. However, when the spectacle becomes the topic of discourse, when it’s mediated, that’s when we can apprehend it and contemplate it rationally. This
ratiocination allows us to perceive the root causes of those things that terrify us while sapping them of their power to terrify. A startling image used theatrically in art may horrify or appall us in the instant, but we can start to habituate ourselves to it when we learn more about it—what the artist’s intentions were behind it, what sort of political or cultural critique was intended, etc. This could work just as well with acts of terrorism—if we knew a terrorist group’s programmatic objectives, this knowledge might allow us to see an otherwise appalling act of violence more objectively. But for the audience who hungers for such thrills and is not compelled to contemplate the root causes of the spectacle, the spectacle may not end up serving the purpose intended for it at all.

Art, crucially, is most effective when it estranges its audience from the immediate sensations encompassed therein. Performance art, like terrorism, draws the spectator into a theatrical relationship with the art form through the spectacle it creates. Such spectacles may be expressly designed to shock the viewer. The danger, then, of any art form that is intended to shock its audience is that it runs up against these same limits where raw emotion inures a viewer from further contemplation. Thus, for DeLillo, the act of contemplating the work of art is crucial. Art can only be redemptive if its meaning is elusive and challenges its viewers to contemplate it further. Thus, a critical work ethic is engendered through any work that compels such contemplation, whose meaning eludes us or challenges us to re-examine previously held values and assumptions.

In his fiction, DeLillo frequently explores the limits of performance art’s power to captivate, and the practical obstacles to its accessibility to and reception by a mass audience. In DeLillo’s 2001 novella, *The Body Artist*, journalist Mariella Chapman catalogues various forms of increasingly bizarre performance art:
There is the man who stands in an art gallery while a colleague fires bullets into his arm. This is art. There is the lavishly tattooed man who has himself fitted with a crown of thorns. This is art…. There is the woman who makes paintings with her vagina. This is art. There is the naked man and woman who charge into each other repeatedly at increasing speeds. This is art, sex, and aggression. There is the man in women’s bloody underwear who humps a mountain of hamburger meat. This is art, sex, aggression, cultural criticism and truth. There is the man who drives nails into his penis. This is just truth. (104-105)

Granted, these categories of “art” seem somewhat arbitrarily assigned here. While these other displays of various acts of self-mutilation and scatological exhibitionism can somehow be considered “art” by the above reckoning, it’s not clear how the final example of the man driving nails into his penis is “just truth” and not also “art,” while the man who has a colleague fire bullets into his arm is still artistic; nor is it clear what this “truth” entails. In any case, though, all of these forms of what Chapman, and perhaps DeLillo himself consider performance art draw their visceral power from the phobic object at the core of the spectacle they put on. All of these performance pieces are disturbing in many senses, and while they’re all spectacle-driven, these spectacles defy easy assimilation into one’s everyday sensory experience. However, no stable, readily graspable meaning is possible here. Thus, there’s no guarantee that they’ll actually move anyone.

What’s significant about performance art for DeLillo is that its forms cannot be readily commodified in any sort of capitalist exchange (photos of such spectacles, even if permission were granted, would be extremely difficult to sell in a mass market). DeLillo takes us here to the zero-level of art, to states of absolute bodily abjection in achieving something that could still be considered “art” for a discerning critic, at least. These spectacles, once glimpsed, are impossible to ignore, as difficult as it may be to ascertain
the artist’s intended meaning. Performance artists in DeLillo’s later works push art to its affective limits, seeming to show a period of artistic fascination for DeLillo. In *The Body Artist*, DeLillo shows the bizarre but affecting works of Lauren Hartke, whose briefly running guerilla stage show displays her ability to seemingly transform her body to mimic different people while channeling different personalities. Chapman claims that there is meaning behind Hartke’s work that transcends mere spectacle: “Hartke’s work is not self-strutting or self-lacerating. She is acting, always in the process of becoming another or exploring some root identity” (104).

In the sprawling *Underworld*, DeLillo’s true heroes are the artists at the margins of society, who create art that is visible by broad swathes of the public while still resisting and defying commodification. This guerilla art is violent and irreverent, and the artists produce it without concern for profit and at the risk of their own safety and well-being. DeLillo recreates scenes of Lenny Bruce’s stand-up acts, his free-form, unscripted, stream-of-consciousness rants about all aspects of the popular and political culture of the U.S. in the early 1960s. In Bruce’s fictive performances on the evenings of the week of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Bruce riffs on the mantra “We’re all gonna die!” and uses this theme of impending doom to frame his acts. Bruce’s performances are an assault on the genteel sensibilities harbored by anyone in his audience, as he lobbs racial and ethnic slurs while destroying anyone’s desperately needed sense of consolation at a time when the national atmosphere was charged with the imminent fear of nuclear annihilation.

Another of *Underworld’s* guerilla artists is Klara Sax, who began her career as an avant-garde painter who fictively crashed Truman Capote’s Black and White Ball in the mid-1960s at which J. Edgar Hoover was a fictive masquerader, with her troupe of
situationist performance artists who vandalize the affair once they gain entrance. A decade later, Klara has retired to the desert where she has created a momentous display of day-glo-painted WWII bombers that are laid out across a desert plain, and can only be taken in by a view of the entire plain from above. Thus, Klara playfully reappropriates military hardware to make a massive artistic spectacle. Perhaps the most purely insurgent of DeLillo’s guerilla artists is the graffiti artist Moonman 157, who spraypaints subway trains all over New York City by night, whose letters seem to come alive as they “sweat” and “live and breathe and eat and sleep” and “dance and play the sax.” His strikes on trains are unpredictable, and he works with a small entourage of devoted followers who stand lookout. Moonman 157 is perhaps the truest guerilla artist in Underworld in that his works are unstaged, yet conveyed to a vast audience (anyone who sees one of the painted subway trains) with his proud signature on them. He has no desire for profit, nor any chance of reaping rewards for his art other than the pride he feels as captive thousands view his creations every day. His works harm no one, yet they could be considered destructive acts of vandalism. What’s more, Moonman 157, whose real name is Ismael Muñoz, is determined to remain anonymous, and DeLillo eventually shows him to be one of hundreds of homeless, HIV-positive youths who squat in abandoned subway tunnels.

What is crucially important for DeLillo for determining art’s value, then, is art’s resistance to commodification. True art needs to be made without any profit motive, through forms that cannot be readily commodified, if at all. At the end of Underworld, DeLillo goes so far as to valorize a form of art not made by human hands at all, but which is transmitted through mystical reverberation. The miraculous appearance of the image of Esmeralda, a young girl who was raped and killed in the Bronx barrios, appears on a
giant Minute Maid poster on the side of a building as the lights from a passing train hit it at a certain angle at night. DeLillo’s preoccupation with art meets his preoccupation with the supernatural in a wholly secular world. Mesmerized crowds gather to witness the miracle, and some are shown to experience fervent spiritual ecstasy. Indeed, DeLillo invites his readers to believe in the supernatural nature of the miracle, or to scoff at it along with the unbelievers. Even this supposedly supernatural apparition, though, is beholden to the forces of capitalism, since the Minute Maid poster is torn down just a few days after the miracle appears. The most sublime work of art that DeLillo can imagine, which conveys genuine, transcendent grace to scores of viewers, is also the most fragile, and the easiest for market forces—in this case, advertising—to destroy.

Thus, for DeLillo, in order for art to stand on its own and effectively resist the power of cyber-capital, it needs to convey a visceral experience for its viewers and it needs to defy capitalist commodification. In the former case, though, the phobic object and its effect upon its viewers is inherently unstable and uncontrollable—there’s nothing in any phobic object that necessarily determines an audience’s reaction to it, and this is the case for acts of terrorism as much as for acts of performance art. In the latter case, art forms that defy capitalist commodification are also the most tentative and ephemeral—they only last in the moment, for an audience in close proximity, and the fact that they’re not commodifiable means that they can be erased at any time. Hartke’s stage performance only runs as long as the indie playhouse can afford to keep it going; the angel Esmeralda only appears for as long as Minute Maid keeps its billboard posted.
2. The Artist as Terrorist / The Artist as Savior

Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated. (41)

–Bill Gray, Mao II

Critics have long contemplated the power of artists to change public consciousness through their cultural influence. The ideal of the artist as revolutionary can easily be traced back to the Romantic writers, such as Wordsworth, who fancied that the poet could tear apart the social order, purgatively, with his pen. “Literature contemplates itself in revolution, it finds its justification in revolution,” Adam Thurschwell says, “and if it has been called the Reign of Terror, this is because its ideal is indeed that moment in history, that moment when ‘life endures death and maintains itself in it’ in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech” (277). This sums up the romantic ideal that still continues to prevail upon writers who hope to use their art and their very role as artists to make some sort of philosophical, moral, or political intervention into the public affairs of the day.

Thurschwell gives serious consideration to the seemingly idealist notion (in a Berkeleyan sense) that fiction, through its use of language, can actually enact a form of violence and destruction that is akin to that which terrorism enacts. Thurschwell turns to Maurice Blanchot, who claims that literature creates its own objective reality through mobilizing language to create a world of its own. In “Literature and the Right to Death,” Blanchot claims that “what the writer negates in writing a work of fiction is the entire world, in order to substitute the world of the fictional work for the actual world in the imagination of the reader” (qtd. in Thurschwell 283-84). Thus, “[i]f only in imaginary form, the act of writing tears down the world in order to build it anew” (284). Because
the “[l]inguistic meaning presupposes the total annihilation of its signified object,” and because “[t]he word is the absence of that being” of its referent, if an author writes about a woman getting killed, the author effects a death, an annihilation, if only at the level of signs and language.

In theory, at least, Blanchot sees the violence done in fiction as it works on the level of language in the same way that material people and things can be physically destroyed in acts of terrorism: “the operation of language is itself ‘terrorist’ in the quasi-literal sense of erecting the ideality of its meanings and concepts on the absolute annihilation of its objects” (285). For Blanchot, in the imaginary world of fiction itself, very real violence is being done, and this violence gains materiality through the operations of language. However, we’re still operating purely in the realm of language as such, and there’s no physical violence that’s actually being done to actual bystanders. This may sound like deconstructive mystification, then, and Blanchot admits as much: “Of course my language does not kill anyone,” and Thurschwell concedes that “Blanchot ultimately concludes that this total annihilation can only ever be attempted and not actual”; that “[d]espite literature’s best efforts, the world retains a stubborn moment of materiality that resists all attempts at its negotiation” (291). In this, literature’s terroristic impulse cannot achieve the same material destruction that an actual terrorist bombing does, per se.

The dilemma, then, is due to the expectation that art should exert some sort of visceral impact upon its public audience, as intended by the rebellious author. In his fiction, DeLillo explores this fantasy of actual physical violence being done through the use of language itself. In The Names, DeLillo imagines what happens when the signifier
is somehow brought together, made identical, with the thing it signifies, if only for a brief moment. “The Names” refers to a tiny cult of sign-fetishists who wander throughout central Asia, finding people whose names’ initials equate to the initials of the geographical location they come to. The cult kills the hapless victim who unwittingly seals his fate by arriving at a location that shares the same initials as his first and last name. Lightning-like violence bursts out when a set of signifiers (a person’s initials) coincidentally line up with the same set of signifiers for another object (a place’s initials). What would seem like senseless, random killings to anyone else are linked together by this code alone. Of course, the signifier and the signified do not actually become identical here, and the value that the killers place on this alignment of signifiers and signified objects is purely arbitrary for them. The significance of this longing for some fancied pre-lapsarian world in which signs exactly equate to their objects is perhaps more than just a bizarre plot device for DeLillo. On some level, *The Names* can be seen to function as a wry comedy for academic audiences. The plot of the cult is absurd on the face of it. These actions seem to play out some nostalgia for a pre-lapsarian society in which sign and signified are equivocal, when meaning can be unambiguously conveyed, and free of deconstructive irony (the power that the objective correlative, the modernist fetish, held for Eliot, that is). The absurdity of the plot, and the failure of the cult, then, shows the impossibility of this conveyance of pure, unambiguous meaning. However, perhaps this is also the violence, the striking of electricity out of the linguistic materials at hand, that any author strives for? DeLillo has *The Names* play out an author’s own anxieties metaphorically, and they attempt to remedy these anxieties by giving words an inordinate power to effect material violence that transcends their purely symbolic function.
In his 2010 novel, *Omega Point*, DeLillo continues to conceive the power of the word-made-flesh by imagining haiku as the most direct link between words and objects. In the novel, retired military analyst Richard Elster says that “[h]aiku…means nothing beyond what it is. A pond in summer, a leaf in the wind. It’s human consciousness located in nature” (29). Elster has grown tired of the highly symbolic, euphemistic language of warcraft in which none of the Pentagon’s technical terms for warfare have any correlation to the actual violence that occurs in war, and he tries to imagine a new language for warcraft that operates on the same principles as haiku. “It’s the answer to everything in a set number of lines, a prescribed syllable count. I wanted a haiku war…I wanted a war in three lines,” Elster says. “This is the soul of haiku. Bare everything to sight,” he insists, “[s]ee what’s there and then be prepared to watch it disappear” (ibid.). Elster wants to change the consciousnesses of the military planners by making them see what’s actually at stake in war. Military euphemism divests warcraft of its phobic objects altogether, allowing planners to plot out acts of violence antiseptically, never having to see the actual destruction they’re plotting, and only grasping the human deaths in purely abstract terms.⁶

It is revealing that Elster turns to poetry, a purely literary form, as an intervention upon the language of military analysis—something to give real significance and signifying power to the words themselves. Elster sought to do this for military planners, but other of DeLillo’s wordsmiths seek to do this with fiction that would be read by a much broader public. Here, though, the words in the haiku are merely evocative, and refer to certain images—a “pond in summer” or a “leaf in the wind”—that are easy for the listener to conjure in his own mind. Images of what actually occurs in war—bodies
blown to bits, mangled corpses, and grievously injured victims—are harder to picture, and must be ignored in order for the military strategies to be carried out. Elster’s attempt to reform the Pentagon from within by instituting new types of language ends in his expulsion.

With the case of Elster, we see a writer who has infiltrated the corridors of power and attempts to reform the U.S. war machine from within through the power of language. DeLillo here blends the authorial fantasy of the power of words with a political program of reform. Elster is fired because his ideas are unsound, and the Pentagon staff thinks he’s gone insane. The regime is quick to snuff out threats from within, but it was the Pentagon who originally recruited Elster, who we learn was a writer and academic in his earlier career, to channel his talents for warchart. The regime brought a rebel into its own service, and expelled him once he reverted to his rebellious ways. DeLillo here illustrates the guile of state power, and of cyber-capital more broadly, in its appropriation of writers who would wage war against it.

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse claims that cultural rebels of previous eras of Western history “survive essentially transformed”; “[t]hey are no longer images of another way of life but rather freaks or types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than a negation of the established order” (59). “Prior to the advent of this cultural reconciliation,” Marcuse claims, “literature and art were essentially alienation, sustaining and protecting the contradiction—the unhappy consciousness of the divided world, the defeated possibilities, the hopes unfulfilled, and the promises betrayed. They were a rational, cognitive force, revealing a dimension of man and nature which was repressed and repelled in reality” (61). However, Marcuse claims that “the essential gap between
the arts and the order of the day, kept open in the artistic alienation, is progressively closed by the advancing technological society. And with its closing, the Great Refusal is in turn refused; the ‘other dimension’ is absorbed into the prevailing state of affairs” (64). Thus, “[t]he works of alienation are themselves incorporated into this society and circulate as part and parcel of the equipment which adorns and psychoanalyzes the prevailing state of affairs. Thus they become commercials—they sell, comfort, or excite” (ibid.). Marcuse revealingly says that the “intent and function of these works have thus fundamentally changed” as once-antagonistic works become incorporated into the everyday texture of postindustrial society.

On the one hand, no one can deny that literature in the twenty-first century is inextricably bound to the system of capitalist exchange that idealistic authors would otherwise seek to defy. In what he calls a “zero-sum game,” Mao II’s protagonist writer Bill Gray sees novelists’ cultural capital declining in direct proportion to the public esteem that terrorists gain through their acts of actual violence that captivate their public’s attention: “[t]he degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous” (157). This “incorporation,” which Gray never explains but which seems to refer to the profit motive for artists in becoming servants to their publishing houses, is thus the point at which any artist ceases to be transgressive, writing with an outsider’s voice. In any case, though, any author who wishes to be read by a mass public has no choice here; he is caught in a double bind in his relationship with his publishers, who must answer to the bottom line. Any artist who refuses to become “incorporated,” then, would seem to run up against the limits of his power to transgress
while still retaining his outsider, “rebel” status. Thurschwell says “[t]o the extent that the literary acts issue in concrete aesthetic representations (whether these are books, performances, or images), they enter immediately into the universal commodification imperative of capitalist exchange” (291).

Frank Lentricchia, however, argues that transgressive art is still possible and that there still are transgressive artists left in the world. These artists serve as safety valves for the more destructive impulses in a society. According to Lentricchia, “The crime of the authentic artist is nothing other than the crime of originality,” that is, the refusal to produce art that can be readily commodified or that preserves the status quo (21). “The transgressive artist believes himself to be the one undegraded opponent of a corpsed world—weaponless except for the originality of his writing: the only humane countercultural response, whose failure would necessitate physical force” (ibid.).

Importantly, then, Lentricchia sees both Wordsworth and the “Unabomber” Theodore Kaczynski as self-proclaimed philosophical champions of this role (22). Lentricchia credits the Unabomber with “tell[ing] us that what he desired was not to kill people but ‘to make an impression on society with words’,” which is “surely irrefutable evidence of Kaczynski’s total madness” (22).7 “The surest way, in Unabomber logic, of recapturing the serious artist’s ideal of the writer as a culture-shaping force is to do spectacular serial murder, for the purpose of becoming America’s most famous terrorist within” (24). Lentricchia claims that Kaczynski’s rants against modern Western society—in its gross materialism and all the attendant social ills ranging from depression, substance abuse, divorce, and domestic abuse—are, in fact, not unlike those of leftist cultural critics over the past two centuries, from the German idealists to the Frankfurt
School [including Marcuse], and in literary figures from Wordsworth to Pynchon and DeLillo. Lentricchia links together these disparate figures transhistorically through the cultural critique they all advance. He does not seek to equate Kaczynski and the other writers and critics he cites on any sort of moral ground here, but only seeks to show how their ideals of writing as a form of social correction may have more in common than anyone else would suggest. However, while Wordsworth may have had good reason to believe that the transgressive writer was in the vanguard of political revolutionaries at the time of the French Revolution, this is by no means a foregone conclusion by the turn of the millennium. Kaczynski only achieved fame, and consequently the publication of his manifesto, because of the violence he first unleashed with his bombs. His treatise against the evils of technology would never have been published in the New York Times otherwise.

In linking together these disparate figures—Marcuse and Adorno, DeLillo, Pynchon, and Kaczynski—Lentricchia is doing so only because all of these figures engage in various forms of anti-capitalist cultural critique through their own writing, regardless of mode. He is valorizing the role of the “writer,” defined broadly, as a political activist. It is remarkable that he includes one of the most notorious media-branded “terrorists” of the twentieth century on a short list with a set of novelists. One wonders what others might make the list if Lentricchia wished to be truly incendiary: perhaps Ayman al-Zawahiri, whose anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist tracts spelled out Al Qaeda’s programmatic objectives at least as lucidly as Kaczynski? Granted, Lentricchia is most likely being sardonic in linking the Unabomber with these venerated literary and
critical figures. Yet the notion remains: if the writing itself is politically critical of capitalism, does the writer play an important political role through the act of writing?

Of all of his works, then, DeLillo makes his most astute critique of the romantic idea of the writer as public figure, and the misguided notion that the writer is contending with the terrorists on some philosophical level, in *Mao II*. In this novel, DeLillo cogently explores the waning of the Romantic view of the transgressive artist, and the desire to find ways to impact public consciousness in new, more violent ways. Some critics, such as Ryan Simmons, conflate DeLillo’s actual views with those of Bill Gray therein—that DeLillo himself actually envied the terrorists’ power to captivate in ways that he felt his novels did not. However, in exploring the quandary that drives Bill Gray to his destruction—the novelist’s professional envy over the terrorist’s power to captivate a public’s imagination through acts of destruction—DeLillo is compelled to defuse this line of reasoning altogether, which would equate violence with art in producing the same end goals: altering people’s consciousesses.

In doing so, DeLillo comes to terms with the despair that he sees novelists facing when they lose sight of the importance of their work and try to compete with the world of images. In the arms race of creating newsworthy images the terrorists have the advantage and the novelists will never be able to compete. Bill Gray laments that terrorists have now captured public attention and romantic imagination in ways that he supposes novelists once did. Gray points to the age of the late modernists as the last point at which authors could truly affect human perception: “Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings. This is the new tragic narrative” (157). Gray sees such spectacles of actual
(rather than narrative) destruction as having supplanted a public appetite for drama that he supposes used to be sated by literature in previous eras: “[y]ears ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated” (42). This is a very grandiose claim, and in the postmodern age, Gray is fully invested in the romantic notion of the artist as Luciferian rebel that Lentricchia discussed, the very role that Marcuse claims artists once played before the advent of modern industrial capitalism.

Gray’s factotum Scott claims that “[t]he novel used to feed our search for meaning. Quoting Bill. It was the great secular transcendence. The Latin mass of language, character, occasional new truth. But our desperation led us toward something larger and darker” (72). Gray claims that “[n]ews of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the narrative” (42). Thus, Gray seems to be desperately imagining ways for the socially conscious artist to find other forms of radical action outside of art, imagining himself as a terrorist himself. Gray fancied his unpublished novel as a secret weapon he keeps stockpiled at his mountain compound, a “fiction bomb” that he would one day unleash upon the world. Gray cultivates his own aura precisely through his disappearance, and the resulting rumors of his demise and his return: “Bill was devising his own cycle of death and resurgence” which makes Scott think of “great leaders who regenerate their power by dropping out of sight and then staging messianic returns” (141). Scott was holding the manuscript of Gray’s unpublished novel, which had been gathering length and mass for the past twenty years, as a secret weapon: “the manuscript would sit, and word would travel, and the pictures would
appear, a small and deft selection, one time only, and word would build and spread, and the novel would stay right here, collecting aura and force, deepening old Bill’s legend, undyingly” (224). Yet Gray’s aura collects not around his actual writing, as indeed Scott intends that the novel will never actually be published, but through the mystique of Gray as mysterious figure for the public intrigue. The cult of Bill Gray is built around the absent center, rather than the actual quantifiable writing of the man. DeLillo here recalls the mystique of other reclusive and publicity-shunning novelists of the time like J.D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon.

DeLillo’s novels are full of artists who capitulate to the system of capitalist exchange, either willingly or despite their best efforts to resist it. Ironically, though, the terrorists in DeLillo’s novels cannot escape this system either, as their actions are readily appropriated by the existing political regime. While Gray may envy the terrorists’ ability to captivate the public imagination, he also sees them as nothing other than petty dictators: “It’s pure myth, the terrorist as solitary outlaw. These groups are backed by repressive governments. They’re perfect little totalitarian states. They carry the old wild-eyed vision, total destruction and total order” (158). Terrorists have everything to lose, Gray sees, and they would fain sacrifice their own lives for the causes they purport to serve. Moreover, their activities only play into the hands of totalitarian regimes that they would otherwise claim to be fighting against. In the sense that the author has compromised his values by becoming “incorporated,” so has the terrorist become incorporated into the power circuit in which he operates through his violence.8

DeLillo believes that the author shouldn’t exaggerate his own power to impact public consciousness—he cannot beat terrorists at their own game; fiction by its very
nature isn’t terrorism as shock. Gray seeks to break the circuit of terrorism-capitalism through his eventual self-ordained mission to sacrifice his life in the public spotlight. In entering the field of political discourse, augmented by mass-media publicity, Gray volunteers to be swapped as a hostage for an obscure Swiss poet kidnapped by a Marxist terrorist group in Beirut. Through this action, Gray believes he is vying with the terrorists effectively in a way that his art does not allow. This purely symbolic gesture, which Gray intended to make fully public through the news media, would have made quite a story—a reclusive, once-famous novelist with a cult following had come out of twenty years’ hiding to exchange his life with that of a lesser poet, a true act of solidarity among artists. Lentricchia sees this as “both a political and literary act, the last, desperate means available to him to reenter the stream of the inner life of his culture and become what his culture needs in order to see itself clearly, in its dehumanized state, so much the better to change itself” (30). Thus, Gray’s self-conscious act of self-sacrifice is his way of acting in the public theater in an immediate way that he could not do through his art alone, and which is more genuine, and done in better faith, than the media-savvy posturing of the terrorists. Gray’s suicide mission, though, fails in the most disgraceful and lackluster way possible, as he dies alone on a boat en route to Lebanon from massive internal injuries sustained after being hit by a car in Athens. DeLillo intervened to snuff out his protagonist conveniently, thus accentuating the futility of his quest, which ends in a whimper. Gray dies without anyone’s knowledge of the mission he’d committed to, or that he had come out of hiding in the first place. His passport was stolen from his body, thus erasing the only evidence of his true identity. Gray’s attempt to step onto the media stage was thwarted by happenstance before he was even able to reach his destination.
One gets the sense that DeLillo snuffed out his hero all too easily, his quixotic quest for political agency as an artist ends prematurely. By setting up this example, then, DeLillo shows his extreme skepticism of the artist’s ability to take the world by storm through a work of fiction in the world of cyber-capital. He condemns artists who place this sort of value on their art in the first place, when sensational spectacles mediated by news have already become the preferred food for cultural consumption for most of the postmodern novelist’s potential audience.

A naïve view of the dynamics of power would figure cyber-capital and terrorism as two diametrically opposed sides. However, DeLillo is acutely aware of terrorism’s inscription within capitalism, and the same goes for other forms of resistance, artistic or not. The task for the artist, then, seems to be to find a way to escape the circuits of cyber-capital through that art. In this sense, Thurschwell credits literature as creating a “third way” which is neither caught up in the circuit of capital, nor is purely oppositional and nihilistic. It is literature’s ability to create its own ontological reality within its pages that allows the artist to defy the objective reality of cyber-capital, without resorting to terrorism’s forms of actual violence. Literature’s ultimate value is to thrive in what Blanchot says is its “ultimate ambiguity whose strange effect is to attract literature to an unstable point where it can change both its meaning and its sign,” an ambiguity that is at the same time “a power to work substantial metamorphoses, a power capable of changing everything about it without changing anything” (291).

Thus, DeLillo’s vision of the novel is politically active only insofar as it creates an alternative historical narrative. “The novel is the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its own brutal confinements,” DeLillo said in his 1997
essay “The Power of History.” Here, DeLillo claims that “the work a novelist may do in the recent or distant past may strike him as…blessed, at least in theory, at the outset, before the book becomes recalcitrant in his hands or, later, before the hypermarket squeezes it off the shelves.” The virtue of the novel, then, for DeLillo, is to provide an imaginative space, a forum in which artists and terrorists *can* indeed compete on the level of ideas. Perhaps this is the only possibility for the novel to function as a subversive force in the political world, and for the novelist to serve as political activist through his art.

**3. Fiction’s Third Way: Counter-Narrative and Counter-History in *Falling Man***

In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space. (39)

—Don DeLillo, “In the Ruins of the Future”

In an uncanny sense, with the obvious themes of public fear, fictive plots, and mass spectacle that enthral a worldwide audience, the 9/11 attacks seem made-to-order for DeLillo’s fictive treatment. DeLillo first treated the topic of public catastrophe, the fear of which was ratcheted up to an absurd degree by the news media’s hyping of a mysterious and possibly non-existent “airborne toxic event,” in 1985’s *White Noise*. Indeed, the more shamelessly superstitious of us might suppose that DeLillo predicted the attacks throughout his entire career running right up to September 11, 2001. In his novel *Players* (1977), a group of rooftop partiers comment upon the illusion of an airplane crashing into the newly constructed World Trade Center towers. In *Mao II*, two characters are struck by the ominous presence of the Twin Towers from the window of an apartment on the Lower West Side, like two huge “black, latex slabs” (87). In *Underworld*, Klara Sax sees the Twin Towers everywhere in her mind in the summer of
1974. Indeed, on the cover of the later trade editions of Underworld, the two towers loom in the background behind and above a church steeple, with the tops of the towers obscured by fog (or smoke?). If 9/11 did not happen, it might have been necessary for DeLillo to invent it in his fiction. In Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction, Peter Boxall credits DeLillo with the gift of literary “prophecy,” the ability to interpret the “hidden underlying forces that continue to produce history” and “the spirit of a future that has not yet been lived out” (qtd. in Thurschwell 298n.10). Perhaps no late-twentieth-century novelist has addressed the cultural impact of the World Trade Center upon public consciousness as explicitly before the towers’ destruction.

In considering the impact of 9/11 upon his own craft, DeLillo questions how the attacks, which in December 2001 still seemed to defy comprehension, let alone representation, could possibly be addressed in anyone’s fiction. In his earliest published reflections on the event, DeLillo initially saw the destruction of 9/11 as something sublime that horrified us, but, strangely, defied aesthetic or narrative representation. In his December 2001 essay “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections of Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September,” DeLillo laments that 9/11 was “so vast and terrible that it was outside imagining even as it happened” (39). This seems like an odd statement coming from someone who so artfully imagined the atomic bomb looming over the steppes like “some thunder god of ancient Eurasia” in the fictive mind of his J. Edgar Hoover when the bomb was first detonated by the Soviets during the 1951 National League Championship game (Underworld 23). Or again as a god towering into the stratosphere right before a military plane flies through the mushroom cloud, turning everyone for the moment into illuminated skeletons in a phantasmagoric netherworld. By contrast, in his
December 2001 essay, and, as I will explain further, in his 9/11 novel *Falling Man*, DeLillo is struck cold by his apprehension of the towers collapsing: “We could not catch up to it. But it was real, punishingly so, an expression of the physics of structural limits and a void in one’s soul, and there was the huge antenna falling out of the sky, straight down, blunt end first, like an arrow moving backward in time” (39).

In his 1997 essay “The Power of History,” DeLillo claims that language can be a form of “counterhistory.” DeLillo sees history as the function of discourse that supports and legitimates the regime in power. Language in fiction, then, is playful and uninhibited, rebellious and incendiary: it “can be an agent of redemption, the thing that delivers us, paradoxically, from history’s flat, thin, tight and relentless designs, its arrangements of stark pages, and that allows us to find an unconstraining otherness, a free veer from time and place and fate.” In this essay, DeLillo says that his free, unconstrained use of language in *Underworld* was “the primal clash” of language to “work in opposition to the enormous technology of war that dominated the era and shaped the book’s themes.” If there is any political efficacy in fiction, it is through the infinite freedom that the writer has to fashion language to convey any message, or set of impressions, that he chooses. “The writer sets his pleasure, his eros, his creative delight in language and his sense of self-preservation against the vast and uniform Death that history tends to fashion as its most enduring work.”

In the “Ruins” essay, then, DeLillo worries over some of the problems that 9/11 poses for narrative, but in doing so, he claims that the crucial task of the fiction writer who deals with 9/11 is to craft a narrative in opposition to that of both the terrorists and of cyber-capital. Intellectually, DeLillo knows that any politically critical, non-jingoistic
narrative about 9/11 ought to address some of the dangers of twenty-first-century cyber-capital, which he realizes is a cause of Al Qaeda’s rage, an enabler of their highly coordinated attacks, and the deliverer of the destruction they plotted (the airplanes themselves). The critical narrative, though, ought to also self-reflexively address the problems of narrative itself, which can become a reductive schema for simplifying an otherwise unknowably complex situation. This is a problem for those who would demonize Al Qaeda, and for Al Qaeda who would demonize their Western enemies.

On the one hand, DeLillo sees one’s own involvement in terrorism is actually an investment in an extreme form of narrative, where “plots reduce the world” and enable the plotter to ignore everything else outside the plot. The belief that America and global capitalism are evil and soul-destroying is what has empowered Al-Qaeda terrorists to live their final days with a higher purpose, and to commit their acts of spectacular murder inured against sympathy for their victims: “All tactical, linked, layered. He knows who we are and what we mean in the world—an idea, a righteous fever in the brain. But there is no defenseless human at the end of his gaze”; DeLillo assures us that the terrorist does not see the helpless woman who pushes her infant child in a stroller (34). Part of the “evil” of cyber-capitalism for Al Qaeda, then, is that it seems to be at irreconcilable odds with the “truth” of the Islamists’ own narrative. This was as true for Libra’s Lee Harvey Oswald bent on his assassination plot as it is for the Qaeda hijackers, as DeLillo understands them.

On the other hand, in opposition to the narrative of the terrorists, DeLillo poses 9/11’s “counter-narrative” of the survivors. This counter-narrative is essentially fictive, carried out by rumors and speculations and embellished stories of not-really-eyewitness
accounts. This counter-narrative is propagated by the Internet, “shaped in part by rumor, fantasy, and mystical reverberations” (35). To construct this counter-narrative, DeLillo says we need these fictive embellishments “to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response” (ibid.). If the terrorists’ narrative was of the Americans as infidels who ought to be destroyed without pity, the spectacle of destruction they created was endowed with its own powerful phobic objects: who can forget the images of the voluminous black smoke billowing out of the sides of the towers in their final moments, or the towers collapsing one by one as easily as sand castles, crushing the thousands of lives trapped inside. The counter-narrative of the survivors, then, which portrays the Americans as shocked and undeserving victims, uses more of this stock of phobic objects—body parts of jumpers after hitting the pavement, bits of clothing, random shoes, personal affects of victims drifting into people’s backyards weeks later. The fact that many of these images are embellished and sensationalized is inevitable, but that’s part of the work of the narrative, to calcify these half-remembered facts, impressions, and ideas into an account of reality.

In DeLillo’s view, the fiction-writer, revealingly, contributes to this counter-narrative. The writer, he says, must feel a certain sort of desperation in contemplating how to possibly address 9/11: “The event itself has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is” (39). “The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us,” DeLillo says, “[b]ut language is inseparable from the world that provokes it.” In contemplating the actual experience of being trapped
in one of the towers right before its collapse, the writer can only sit at his desk “trying to imagine the moment, desperately” (ibid.). And in his 2001 essay, he leaves it at that.

DeLillo rises to this very challenge in his 2007 novel *Falling Man*. While much of the novel is concerned with the daily coping mechanisms to which traumatized survivors resort, the final pages of the novel showcase DeLillo’s compelling description of the protagonist Keith’s excruciating march down the seventy flights of stairs, racing against time before the tower crushes him (quite similar to actual reports of survivors’ escapes down dozens of flights of stairs). Once Keith makes it outside with his physical life spared, he sees a white dress-shirt floating in the air, “arms waving like nothing in this life” (246). This empty shirt functions as a sublime object that invokes both the beauty of its death-defying freedom, and horror in the conspicuous absence of the person who once wore it. As part of the counter-narrative of 9/11 that DeLillo addresses in “Ruins,” he writes of the rumored, likely embellished details of pieces of paper that fell from the towers driven into rubber tires and concrete walls. As novelist, then, DeLillo consciously employs the very techniques of the survivors’ counter-narrative that he critiques in “Ruins” with his own poetically imagined phobic object of the empty, floating shirt, which could have been based on any number of accounts of bizarre falling remnants of victims high above.

The operation of the post-9/11 novel, then, is for DeLillo to help readers conceptualize a reality that seems “unmanageable” and unfathomable. Yet, the crucial figure in *Falling Man* is the eponymous performance artist who spontaneously re-enacts falls from buildings in public for large audiences. The falling man, much like the person in the iconic 9/11 photo, is one of the most famous phobic objects in recent history. This
is art that seeks to shock and terrorize, and it operates through the incendiary power of this phobic object entirely. Performance art strives for the immediate event as the art form in itself, which compels us to bear witness and be terrified—in this sense alone art operates on the same principles as terrorism. Narrative art, then, serves as an antidote to terrorism by undoing the terrorists’ own narrative rather than matching it. This is the central tension in DeLillo’s novels of terrorism: his appraisal of performance artists who present the most hard-hitting, violent forms of art to the public while ultimately retaining his belief in the novel as the most comprehensive means of grasping the complex geopolitical systems that such violence reacts against. This is the ultimate upshot of DeLillo’s *Falling Man*: he uses his novel as a counter-narrative to both the terrorists’ and the performance artists’ own that attempts to show how all of these performers—the terrorists and the victims themselves—are bound together in the same geopolitical system. Art is most effective when it estranges its audience from the immediate sensations encompassed therein. *Falling Man* attempts to do this by recreating the emotional alienation and desire for reassimilation felt by the victims, but without offering them guaranteed redemption.

The critical imperative for novelists who write about 9/11 seems to be to find new and impactful ways of accusing or implicating the U.S. for its role as neoimperialist superpower at the millennium, which ignorantly created the conditions—the worldwide *ressentiment*—that made Al Qaeda revolt violently against the U.S. In her essay “Organic Shrapnel: Affect and Aesthetics in September 11 Fiction,” Rachel Greenwald Smith claims that *Falling Man* fails to offer a cogent critique of the War on Terror in what she sees as DeLillo’s inability to offer us any new perspective on 9/11 and the circumstances
surrounding it that’s in any way different from the politicized bromides of “our”
victimhood and our need to recover. Smith claims that DeLillo uses a stock set of clichés
of trauma and recovery, and that his attempt at therapy through his novel merely validates
the bourgeois sensibilities of fin-de-siècle Americans before the attacks. She sees this
imaginative failure as a form of political complicity with the ruling regime, where
DeLillo’s aesthetic fatigue is co-extensive with “the profound instrumentalization of the
event at the service of political and economic goals that were more ideologically
continuous than disruptive” (155). Thus, for Smith, the politically progressive novelist
should invent new and complex metaphors for showing the U.S. domination in global
geopolitical relations. For Smith, the narrative structure of *Falling Man* is too contrived,
too formulaic, too pat, to offer any insightful, incisive critique of the geopolitical
conditions that make 9/11 possible.

However, other critics such as Linda S. Kauffman appraise *Falling Man* for its
irresolution, the impossibility of healing and closure that is characteristic of most of
DeLillo’s other works. Kauffman claims in her essay “The Wake of Terror: Don
DeLillo’s ‘In the Ruins of the Future’, ‘Baader-Meinhof’, and *Falling Man*” that DeLillo
effectively replicates the experience of amnesia through his narrative techniques, which
bears a political critique all its own. The themes of memory loss prevail throughout the
narrative, as through the experiences of the Alzheimer’s patients whom Keith’s estranged
wife Lianne treats (370-71). Kauffman argues that all of these techniques mimic the
generalized regime discourse in the U.S. in the years after 9/11, namely the U.S. lack of
acknowledgment of its geopolitical role in fostering the conditions that supposedly
engendered Al Qaeda’s terrorism. Moreover, Keith’s uncontrollable addiction to
gambling and his emotional isolation that causes him to drift further away from his estranged wife and son amount to a traumatic recurrence of his experience in the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, but also of the persistence of the same self-absorbed, solipsistic pursuits that preoccupied many Americans prior to the attacks. Rather than shaking us out of our complacency, we all go on sleepwalking after the event.

As discussed herein, the forms of art that DeLillo grants the power to shock are almost always visual. Falling Man is the paragon act of performance art and terrorism—a post-traumatic reminder of terrorist attack; this spectacle is of a different degree of intensity than any other spectacles of performance art that DeLillo portrays. The subjectivity of the Qaeda hijacker Hammad, a composite figure whom DeLillo portrays as an insecure, socially awkward, and sexually repressed young man, is interspersed throughout the novel right up to the moment of the plane crash that throws Keith out of his office chair.11 Yet the terrorist with the real power to terrify in the story is Falling Man, whose guerilla performances, attacks really, penetrate Lianne’s posttraumatic haze and horrify the unwitting onlookers below.

The 9/11 attacks in New York City were quite possibly the most widely documented public catastrophe to ever be captured on film, as news cameras recorded virtually every moment of the event after the first plane collision. Photos abound of survivors, abject, covered in dust, and of emergency workers and rescue crews, all contributing to the popular iconography of the event. However, the paragon photo of 9/11 itself, which most horrifyingly and sublimely captures the experience of the attack and the victim’s imminent death, is the “Falling Man” photo taken by Richard Drew, which
appeared on page 2 of the *New York Times* on September 12, 2001. It was widely reported that hundreds of victims, who were trapped on the floors above the inferno and realized that escape by stairs was impossible, jumped to their deaths from over eighty stories up in an ultimate act of desperation. Drew’s “Falling Man” became instantly iconic, almost literally driving this experience home for viewers. Here was a man who went to the office on a typical Tuesday morning in September, wearing his usual dress slacks, white dress shirt, and tie, and by 9 a.m. he became the most iconic victim of the most spectacular terrorist attack, immortalized on film in the moment of his spectacular death. The photo is aesthetically captivating as well, as the man is framed against the immense steel and glass columns of the tower’s outer shell in his perfect free fall, showing pure human frailty set against a massive, man-made monolith. The photo, unstaged and taken purely incidentally, is often regarded as art, and persists as the most memorable work of art to portray 9/11 to a worldwide audience.

In the months after 9/11, then, DeLillo’s Falling Man (whose real name in the novel is David Janiak) would stage spectacular dives off the tops of buildings all around New York City, using only a cable and harness to secure himself from hitting the pavement. He would appear “always upside down, wearing a suit, a tie and dress shoes” and mimicking the posture of the actual “Falling Man” in Drew’s photograph (33). The spectacle he creates terrifies his audience in the exact moment of his jump, for no one can see that he won’t kill himself. His spectacle, though, also seems to consciously recreate the spectacle of the falling victims of the Twin Towers. Janiak would always perform his fall in crowded areas in daytime, to ensure maximum attention: “There was one thing for them to say, essentially. Someone falling. Falling man. She wondered if this was his
intention, to spread the word this way, by cell phone, intimately, as in the towers and in the hijacked planes” (165). If any New Yorker had tried to suppress the memories of 9/11, his act conspicuously recreates the original horror, bringing it all back into daytime consciousness.

For Lianne, who is recovering from her own survivor’s trauma, Falling Man’s guerilla tactics amount to a form of emotional terrorism. Lianne “wishe[s] she could believe this was some kind of antic street theater, an absurdist drama that provokes onlookers to share a comic understanding of what is irrational in the great schemes of being or in the next small footprint” (163). For Lianne, “[h]e brought it back, of course, those stark moments in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump” (33). Falling Man’s act, then, becomes a sentimental object, the screen for others to project their fears onto. Lianne wonders why she can’t turn away from the spectacle and realizes it’s “[b]ecause she saw her husband somewhere near. She saw his friend, the one she’d met, or the other, maybe, or made him up and saw him, in a high window with smoke flowing out. Because she felt compelled, or only helpless, gripping the strap of her shoulder bag” (167). Lianne “felt her body go limp. But the fall was not the worst of it. The jolting end of the fall left him upside-down, secured to the harness, twenty feet above the pavement. The jolt, the sort of midair impact and bounce, the recoil, and now the stillness, arms at his sides, one leg bent at the knee” (168).

If Falling Man’s act could be considered performance art, it’s an extreme form of it that tarries with the real possibility of death, or the certain appearance of it. Yet, even if the visceral experience for the act’s witnesses is undeniable in the moment, there is a natural, perhaps necessary limit to the reach of any piece of performance art that is done
spontaneously. In *The Body Artist*, even though Hartke’s show is scheduled for regular stage performances, these were extremely short-lived and not widely publicized. However, if photographed at the right moment, a public performance such as Falling Man’s can be made accessible to millions of viewers. Lianne was able to find all the information there exists on Falling Man with an instant Google search. She saw a whole gallery of photos of his performances, “Dangling from the balcony of an apartment building on Central Park West….Suspended from the roof of a loft building in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn….Dangling from the flies at Carnegie Hall during a concert, string section scattered….Dangling over the East River from the Queensboro Bridge….Sitting in the back of a police car” (219). He’d “been arrested at various times for criminal trespass, reckless endangerment and disorderly conduct. He’d been beaten by a group of men outside a bar in Queens” (220). She found a scholarly panel discussion at the New School that was titled “Falling Man as Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave New Chronicler of the Age of Terror” (ibid.). She was also dismayed to read the news that he had died at age 39 of an apparent heart attack due to high blood pressure, seemingly unconnected to his death-defying performances. Lianne was captivated by the exquisite beauty of the spectacle of his performances: “Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific” (222). Not everyone saw such beauty in his spectacle, though, as outraged spectators took the opportunity to trounce him outside the bar in Queens.

It is significant that Lianne’s witnessing of two of Falling Man’s performances seems to catalyze her own emotional breakthrough in the text. Lianne had been wading through her own quiet desperation after the attacks, trying to piece together her broken
relationship with her husband and looking for opportunities to commune with the elderly in a nursing home who were experiencing their own private traumas. Upon the pure shock she experiences in witnessing Janiak’s falls, Lianne is broken down to the state of abjection she experienced on the day of the attacks that she never consciously embraced. From that point on, she is able to forgive her father for his suicide when he was in the throes of Alzheimer’s, and she is able to send Keith away on his own path of self-destruction when she realizes she can’t do anything to help him cope with his own trauma. Lianne’s emotional state has been blocked, and this opening of the floodgate of her grief at this spectacle of suffering gives her the catalyst for her own emotional release that she needs to dispel her melancholia.

However, performance art, just as with terrorism, still has infinitely contingent and unpredictable effects, which may in their reception by their audience be at total odds with the agent’s original intentions. In the end, the performance artist can only gesture at a form of art that transcends capitalist appropriation, and ultimately cannot escape the same circuits of power that terrorism cannot escape. John N. Duvall claims that “What Falling Man’s performance and Lianne’s reception underscore is the gap between the artistically mediated response to trauma and the individual reception of such a work of art” (167). Lianne’s reaction is one of many. The fact that she found the horror that Falling Man’s performance brought her therapeutic is one of many contingent responses; it seems that most other viewers, just as they did for the real-life performance artist Kerry Skarbakka, found it obnoxious and appalling.

Art is most effective when it estranges its audience from the immediate sensations encompassed therein. Falling Man makes its sensations immediate, yet the sensational
nature of his performance through spectacle makes it just as dismissible for its audience as it is immediate. The spectators were all too willing to reconcile their momentary horror at the spectacle as the prank of some psychotic stuntman who’s only seeking publicity. *Falling Man*, as a novel, then, attempts to create aesthetic distance between the reader and the catastrophe therein by recreating the experience of emotional alienation and desire for reassimilation felt by the victims. The novelist operates akin to how John Orr and Dragan Klaić claim that “the drama of terror” “works best when it stands back, when it distances the spectator through play or farce…or when it distances its tragic action through gestic extremes of space and time” (61). DeLillo imagines that the Falling Man’s performance makes the experience of terror immediate to the hapless audience, for whom it’s impossible not to make the connection between the staged jump and the 9/11 attacks. Yet, the novel *Falling Man* as a whole, while presenting the spectacle in explicit detail, does much more of the work of estranging, of making the reader experience the emotional alienation and perceptual dislocation of trauma through its narrative. In positioning the Falling Man spectacle at the core of the novel, and even titling the book for the figure, DeLillo honors this outlaw artist. Yet it’s the book itself that circumscribes the figure himself, that contextualizes his performances and reveals what one spectator’s private emotional reaction was amidst a sea of others, who, we are shown, are uncomprehending at best, and violently hostile at worst.

As a post-9/11 precursor to *Falling Man*, in his 2002 short story “Baader-Meinhof,” DeLillo illustrates even more disturbingly the power of both art and the act of violence to affect consciousness, but in ways that are purely contingent upon the individual. In the story, an unnamed young woman sits transfixed for hours at a time,
three days in a row, in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, contemplating Gerhardt Richter’s *17 October 1977* painting cycle. Richter, considered one of the greatest modern German artists, painted this set of fifteen paintings based on actual photographs of the members of the Baader-Meinhof gang, the group of left-wing activists who launched a number of bombings and hijackings in Germany in the early 1970s, who were convicted and who died in prison under mysterious circumstances. Richter’s cycle shows haunting, blurry, out-of-focus images of the conspirators Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, and Gudrun Ensslin in their last days in prison, as well as images of their corpses that show signs of the ambiguous nature of their deaths (a gunshot wound in the head for Baader; apparent hangings for Meinhof and Ensslin). In sitting for multiple hours in the exhibit, the woman feels as if she is sitting in a “mortuary chapel, keeping watch over the body of a close friend” (78). This linking of “viewing” equates the act of contemplating a work of art with holding a solemn vigil for a deceased loved one. While she is caught in rapt attention, an unnamed man joins her in the room whose unwelcome presence interrupts her reverie. When he asks her why she thinks the artist painted his subjects the way he did, she says, “I’m trying to think what happened to them.” He smartly replies, “They committed suicide. Or the state killed them,” pronouncing the word “state” “deep-voiced, in a tone of melodramatic menace,” an attempt at political discourse that the woman finds jarring in her private contemplation. In trying to explain to the man why she feels such a sympathetic connection with the subjects, she says “[s]ome people believe they were murdered in their cells,” a theory which he quickly balks at: “A pact. They were terrorists, weren’t they? When they’re not killing other people, they’re killing themselves.” The woman replies that she thinks there’s so much
sadness in the picture of Ensslin in prison, but the man insists that the subject is clearly smiling. The man, who is clearly flirting with her while chiding her all along, insists that she tell him what she really sees in the paintings. She responds, “I realize now that the first day I was only barely looking. I thought I was looking, but I was only getting a bare inkling of what’s in these paintings. I’m only just starting to look” (80). She sees a blurry object in the background of a painting of a funeral procession of the subjects’ coffins, which she knows is probably a bare tree. “It was a cross,” she thinks, “and it made her feel, right or wrong, that there was an element of forgiveness in the picture, that the two men and the woman, terrorists, and Ulrike before them, terrorist, were not beyond forgiveness.” This is the redemptive message that the woman finds in the paintings, though she refuses to mention this to the man because she “didn’t want to hear someone raise elementary doubts.” Two extremes of individual reception of a piece that’s meant to be mysterious and provoke thought are thus illustrated: extreme emotional investment and distracted, uninterested boredom.

The woman is apparently mending from a recent divorce, and she finds solace in the paintings’ expression of what happens to people in the midst of some unknowable spiritual alienation. Perhaps theirs was the grief or guilt at previous murders committed, or perhaps pride and defiance in the face of abuse in prison. The woman can only speculate, and the paintings become canvases onto which she projects her own meanings. Richter’s actual intentions—compelling viewers to be mystified at the whole complexity of the situation—are actually quite in line with the woman’s own experience of the paintings.15
What happens later that afternoon gives the woman a very different kind of visceral experience which throws her into a much more immediate sense of despair. The woman seemingly reluctantly invites the man back to her studio apartment after they have coffee at a diner, and then refuses his advances. He proceeds to masturbate on her bed while she hides in her bathroom. The man seems guilt-stricken afterwards, and whispers through the bathroom door, “Forgive me….I’m so sorry. Please. I don’t know what to say” (82). In the immediate aftermath of this assault, the woman’s senses are sharpened as the horror of the violation has not yet sunk in: “She saw everything twice now. She was where she wanted to be, and alone, but nothing was the same. Bastard. Nearly everything in the room had a double effect—what it was and the association it carried in her mind. She went out walking, and when she came back the connection was still there, at the coffee table, on the bed, in the bathroom. Bastard. She had dinner in a small restaurant nearby and went to bed early” (82). Her sense of security in her own private quarters has been violated, and she has become radically alienated from her previously familiar surroundings. This alienation is compounded the next morning when she returns to the gallery and sees the man seated alone in front of the very painting of the funeral procession in which she had found such mystical solace—now she can longer return to the exhibit, for he has violated that, too, with his continued presence.

DeLillo here shows two kinds of visceral experience radically juxtaposed. The paintings give us the occasion for private contemplation, and this experience is most pure when it is kept private, not put into words, and not discoursed upon by others. Action, however, is what more radically and immediately disturbs us and throws us into a world of insecurity. The man’s sexual assault amounts to an act of terrorism which at once destroys the
woman’s already-fragile sense of security. This act of sexual terrorism ironically follows the woman’s moment of grace, as she comes to believe in redemption for the reputed German terrorists. The paintings, disturbing and unsettling as they are, are passive and allow the viewer to return several times with new perspectives, finding new meanings and nuances. The act of violation, though, would seem to be indisputable in its instrumentality. The man sought instant sexual gratification from the woman, whether or not it was requited, and he was determined to gain it. However, as horrifying as the sex act was for the woman, even this lends itself to be contemplated for the outside observer. What is the man’s actual background? Was he really aggrieved by the act he committed or was there genuine selfishness, if not malice, in it? Various questions and possible meanings accrue around this central act, and while the woman was not physically harmed, her consciousness is ruptured and comes undone in the act’s aftermath. It is DeLillo’s fiction, then, that provides this opportunity for contemplating both the art of violence and the act of violence alike.

In the end, then, it is DeLillo as novelist who stands back as the privileged analyst of the nexus between terrorism and art. As a recovery narrative, yet one that recreates the trauma of 9/11 from the perspective of the traumatized, DeLillo points to Janiak, the Falling Man, as the real hero of *Falling Man*. Lianne learns that Janiak’s final performance was to be a fall without a safety harness, thus ending in his death. This would be the apotheosis of performance art for DeLillo—art that truly resists commodification by destroying the artist in the very climax of performance. This is the artistic ideal that Stockhausen was referring to, when he equated the 9/11 hijackers to musicians who train rigorously for one final performance and then die, “dispatched into
eternity, in a single moment.” It is only in the medium of the novel, though, that DeLillo can have this artist play out this ultimate consummation. This may amount to an ultimate sentimentalization of the novel as the means of attaining this impossible reconciliation in real life. “The novel is the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its own brutal confinements,” DeLillo said in “The Power of History.” The virtue of the novel, then, for DeLillo, is to provide an imaginative space, a forum in which artists and terrorists can indeed compete on the level of ideas that would disrupt the triumphal march of historical and political narrative in public discourse. Perhaps this is the only possibility for the novel to function as a subversive force in the political world, and for the novelist to serve as political activist through his art. DeLillo does not validate or exonerate the lifestyles that Western capitalists live in the new millennium. In the post-traumatic ghost-world of Falling Man, as was the case in his earlier novels, we’re all guilty, all ignorant, all suffering, and all seeking a resolution that won’t come.
CONCLUSION
Islamists, Hijackers, and the Problems of Representation:
Terrorist Subjectivities in Post-9/11 Fiction

It is worth holding the line that separates understanding from justification, the line that divides understanding from explanation. That is the work that the word “evil” does. It holds the line…. In any event, full understanding is God’s work alone. It’s just too hard—and in some sense not important—to understand why one human being can actually take a knife to another person’s throat and lift off his head.

In his 2004 op-ed piece, “The Terrorist as Auteur,” Harvard political scientist Michael Ignatieff cites the documentary One Day in September as exhibiting what he considers the futility of trying to understand the human motives for terroristic violence. This film tracks down the last remaining survivor of the Palestinian cell that killed the Israeli athletes in the 1972 Munich Olympics, and offers the explanation that the man’s turn to anti-Israeli terrorism resulted from his humiliating childhood spent in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Despite the “grim footage” of refugee camp life he acknowledges, Ignatieff is still mystified by the gap between supposed causes and effects. “Such footage might explain why he joined up,” he concedes, “but does it help us understand why he was able to stand and watch while an Israeli athlete, wounded in the shootout, slowly bled to death on the floor?”

Ignatieff wrote his piece in response to the filmed beheadings of kidnapped Westerners in Iraq, claiming that terrorist warfare has reached new levels of horror after 9/11. Now, terrorists use viral video to unleash global terror instantaneously, in ways previous generations of terrorists could only imagine. The spectacle of a live beheading may well be astonishing to us. We may be astonished that such an atrocity is actually being broadcast to us at all (even though most mainstream media networks and
newspapers blocked out the actual decapitations and severed heads). We may also be astonished that anyone could be so cruel as to take a butcher knife or a hacksaw and use it to cut off the head of another living human being, and then hold up the head and gloat about it on camera. While Ignatieff claims that these videos are not entirely unprecedented—we’ve seen terrorist propaganda broadcast by mass media all throughout the twentieth century, and the Internet only increases the potential audience for it—he stops dead in his critical tracks when he draws the concept of “evil” as our license to shut down any further analysis. Attempts to uncover terrorism’s social, political, or personal causes will only lead the analyst to the edge of a gaping chasm, as no rational accounting for the facts of the killer’s life will help us to any better understand the killer’s actual thought processes as he takes up his knife or his box-cutter. Only God can understand what goes through the terrorist’s mind, and it’s not within our abilities as fallible human critics to do so. “Evil” at least provides us with a conceptual tool to categorize violence we don’t understand, or don’t want to understand. Here is political melodrama, fully sanctioned and rationalized, in its most egregious form, and it has been readily taken up as such by politicians ever since 9/11.

The problem with explanation, then, as Ignatieff sees it, has been one that Western media and political discourse have had to tackle in the years since 9/11: how much explanation should be given for the terrorists’ motives, and where do you draw the line between explanation and justification? People who have made any attempt to explain the motives behind Al Qaeda’s atrocities have been charged with treason, as if any explanation for “why they hate us” will automatically lead to exoneration, which is out of the question. The 9/11 attacks presented Americans with “evil” in its most undeniable
form, and this is due to the closeness of the attacks where three thousand victims were quotidian workers from all walks of life. In destroying the World Trade Center in particular, Al Qaeda did not discriminate on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, age, or gender. Thus, politicians have figured the 9/11 attacks as the beginning of a genocidal campaign against *Americans*, as George W. Bush’s September 20, 2001 stated that “the terrorists’ directive commands them to kill all Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans and make no distinctions among military and civilians, including women and children.”

The project of representing the Qaeda agent, the clear and present danger of the moment, involves all manner of political considerations. This task is not necessarily different in nature from any other fictive representation of the terrorist subject, from earlier time periods when terrorism took on different forms, which I discuss in my earlier chapters. However, the nature of Al Qaeda’s terrorism, and the political climate in Western societies in the decade following 9/11, do, indeed, change the stakes for the author considerably. Authors must now contend with the fraught subjects of religion and ethnic identity in connection with terrorism, and with the question of America’s role in the circumstances preceding and following the attacks. Furthermore, authors must contend with academics like Ignatieff, to say nothing of politicians and pundits on both the right and the left, who would excoriate anyone who would offer rational explanations for terrorism after 9/11.

Even though terrorism in the twenty-first century still employs the same tactics of killing civilians and destroying property to spread fear throughout a given society, Al Qaeda’s terrorism is different by nature from earlier cases of terrorism in history. Unlike most other terrorist groups, Al Qaeda does not identify with any particular nation-state.
Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups have cells all over the world, and Islamist terrorism is politicized as a ubiquitous threat. Its terrorism is seen by its practitioners and followers, arguably, as both religious martyrdom and political resistance. Some have claimed that Al Qaeda is driven by strictly ethical, rather than political or religious directives.¹ And, for whatever it may be, Al Qaeda’s terrorism is often portrayed in the West as a force that could destroy civilization. For the first time in history, terrorism is figured by apocalyptic melodrama. The world has been living with the atomic bomb for over six decades, and has come to accept nuclear annihilation as a real possibility. The 9/11 attacks, then, made an imagined connection between nuclear annihilation with terrorism explicit in public discourse. And heaven protect us from the terrorists who would be evil enough to unleash nuclear annihilation upon us.

What is also different about twenty-first century terrorism is the expansive power of the mass media, and particularly the Internet, to spread information over the entire world instantaneously. Anyone who discourses upon terrorism after 9/11 has no lack of informational sources to choose from. Compared to the amount of pundits, bloggers, and conspiracy theorists active on public discourse, the amount of published fiction writers who actually write about terrorism, and about Al Qaeda in specific, is miniscule.²

No author who takes up this subject can claim to be blind to the discourse surrounding him. Indeed, John Updike claimed that he spent hours upon hours of Internet research to get a feel for his subject and for his unlikely protagonist, a seventeen-year-old Arab-American boy in New Jersey who joins up with a radical mosque and plans a truck-bomb attack, for what became his final novel, *Terrorist*, in 2006. The authors that I discuss in this conclusion, Martin Amis, Don DeLillo, and Mohsin Hamid, are Western
by birth or identification. They are among the few who have handled the Al Qaeda
terrorist in fiction, and do so through three very different approaches to representation.
From outright loathing of the Qaeda terrorist (Amis), to equanimity between the terrorist
and his victim (DeLillo), to sympathy for the man who would turn to terrorism and guilty
implication for the reader (Hamid), these three authors show three possible approaches
that fictive representation of current and future terrorist subjects might take.

As in the earlier twentieth-century cases of terrorism I examine, the terrorist is
intimately bound up in the governmental system against which he rebels, both as a
political agent living within that system and in the ways he uses the mechanisms of that
system to his advantage. The multinational capitalist system that scholars call
neoliberalism, which now saturates every society in the world, is the theater in which
terrorism and its policing are being played out (though arguably any form of modern
terrorism has always had far-reaching geopolitical consequences). As an analyst living
and writing within Western society, or for a presumably Western audience, then, the
author of terrorism fiction must also contend with the neoliberal system in some way,
since that is the field of force in which the twenty-first-century terrorist operates, and
against which he rebels. Moreover, for his books to receive a mass readership, the author
relies on market mechanisms to distribute his books far and wide. The author must
inevitably position his readers, then, to judge terrorism in light of the conditions that
formed the terrorist subject and which determined his range of possible responses. In
light of the conditions explored, and the reader’s position within these conditions, the
author allows the possibility of sympathy, or the lack thereof, for his terrorist subjects.
After 9/11, such a view gets much more complicated, and in assigning blame and punishment the personal gets conflated with the political, cultural, racial, and religious in confusing and complicated ways, with legal, political, and even ontological consequences. The matter of “what he is” may in one sense be seen as a matter of ontology, involving questions of one’s own fundamental nature. The concept of “evil,” as Ignatieff invokes it, may be used to give the final judgment on certain people: they’re evil and cannot be understood or negotiated with, end of story. “What he is” may also further refer to one’s overall disposition—the complex welter of psychological, emotional, social, spiritual factors that make up the individual subjectivity. The matter of agency becomes crucial here. On one hand, the subject acted of his own free will, not determined by a group or by one’s inherent metaphysical nature. This view makes it possible to deal with terrorists as criminals on legal terms.

Of course, though, in public opinion and in the execution of the War on Terror, the facts on the ground belie this position, as we consider the prevalence of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia directed against Muslims, Middle Easterners, South Asians, and foreigners of all sorts in the years since 9/11. Despite the official stance of their governments, many Americans and Western Europeans do, indeed, see race, ethnicity, culture, and religion as determining one’s terroristic sympathies, which would necessitate the targeted policing of these groups. Moreover, the simplistic notions that Bush raised in his September 2001 address that Al Qaeda’s goal is “remaking the world and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere,” as demonstrated in Taliban Afghanistan, reveals his underlying logic that Al Qaeda does, indeed, hold ideological directives (however dimly defined) that guide some vague political project of world
domination. Thus, regime discourse upon Al Qaeda is confused both in theory and in practice. The “few bad apples” theory of the Al Qaeda “criminals” is undercut by the ideological and identitarian discourses that are used to shore up would-be terrorists.

It was one thing to figure the Communists as the enemies of Western capitalist civilization. The Communists had a definable ideology, and an identifiable directorate in the Soviet Union and its offices abroad. The fact that the Communists lived and worked alongside capitalist men in gray flannel suits posed its own particular problems, and the fears of infiltration, espionage, and ideological brainwashing charged sci-fi films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and political thrillers like *The Manchurian Candidate*. However, Communist ideology was seen to have originated abroad, and was tied to the directives of Eastern bloc nations which was its distant home base.

However, as Walter Benn Michaels observes in his 2003 essay “Empires of the Senseless: (The Response to) Terror and (the End of) History,” explanatory narratives for violence have moved from blaming the agent’s politics and ideology during the Cold War to blaming the agent’s ontological nature itself during the War on Terror. Instead of “what they believe,” terrorists are now seen as acting on account of “what they are” (“evil” or “criminal”) by the logic employed by both the Bush administration and, ironically, the far Left (i.e., Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire*). Twenty-first-century American liberal pluralism has a humanistic imperative—or at the very least, a political expediency—to honor diversity and multiculturalism; therefore all races, ethnicities, cultures, and religions should be respected, at least in principle. Those who fail to do so, or who resist this practice in obvious ways, will find themselves subject to widespread public censure. Yet, the Qaeda terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks are
Muslim by religion, and Middle Eastern or South Asian by ethnic composition. This ought not pose a problem for relations with Muslims in the Western world out of respect for multicultural precepts alone; therefore the governing powers must differentiate the terrorists as “bad Muslims” who practice a perverted form of Islam, from the “good Muslims” who comprise the vast majority of the practitioners of the world’s largest religion. This reverence for multicultural tolerance poses problems for rightists who claim ethnic and religious profiling is the most effective means to police terrorism, and their disaffection invariably feeds into national xenophobic discourse. Such is the climate in which any author of terrorism fiction after 9/11 must work.

In her essay “Explanation and Exoneration, Or, What We Can Hear,” Judith Butler observes that the narrative of victimhood has become crucial for all U.S. political narratives that legitimate state violence after 9/11. These narratives do so by foregrounding the experience of American victimhood, which is itself undeniable, in the 9/11 attacks. These narratives most often use the first-person perspective of the victim, and one need not look far to find myriad personal accounts from the survivors of the attacks, and from virtually everyone else who was in any way aware of the events of that day, to testify as to how much they suffered.

Indeed, in popular narrative, the American victims of the 9/11 attacks are most often pictured as racially and ethnically diverse, women and men, young and old, but most often identifiably middle-class, having enjoyed all the blessings that democratic society provided them. The New York Times “Portraits of Grief” series of pictorial obituaries portrayed the 9/11 victims as exemplifying ideal family values, work ethic, joy of life, and all-around good citizenship. Howell Raines, the series editor, claimed that
“when I read them, I am filled with an awareness of the subtle nobility of everyday existence, of the ordered beauty of quotidian lives for millions of Americans, of the unforced dedication with which our fellow citizens go about their duties as parents, life partners, employers or employees, as planters of community gardens, coaches of the young, joyful explorers of this great land and the world beyond its shores” (qtd. in Simpson 22). David Simpson, in his 9/11: The Culture of Commemoration, a probing analysis of post-9/11 American sentiment and melodrama, finds a disturbing sense of nationalistic cant in these heartwarming portraits, “an interest in the projection of an all-American wholeness of spirit and a national state of health and happiness, and, inevitably, of capitalist neoliberal health and happiness” (46). After all, as Simpson observes, none of these victims cheated on their spouses, or were indifferent to public service (23). While racial, ethnic, and religious identity was recognized and lauded in some of these profiles, none of them were said to struggle with poverty, which many of the service-level workers in the Towers undeniably did. Their deaths were sentimentalized to make the event palliative for the American public, idealizing American individuality and diversity, while also validating nationalistic and militaristic actions taken in response to the attacks. The “Portraits of Grief” were meant to serve as public therapy at a time when such emotional remedies were needed, but it came from the New York Times in a highly politicized form that played to the nationalistic sentiment.

This narrative of victimhood gets much more complicated, though, when the geopolitical circumstances that preceded 9/11 actually enter into the equation. Other people’s experiences of victimization abroad complicate the master narrative, and Butler claims that inquiries into the individual experiences of the terrorists themselves can lend
crucial insight into the conditions that made the attacks possible. “We can narrate, for instance, what Mohammed Atta’s family life was like,” she suggests, “whether he was teased for looking like a girl, where he congregated in Hamburg, what led, psychologically, to the moment in which he piloted the plane into the World Trade Center. Or what was Osama bin Laden’s break from his family, and why is he so angry?” (5).

Butler claims that this personalizing technique offers a fuller and more comprehensible narrative for 9/11 because it “resituates agency in terms of a subject, something we can understand, something that accords with our idea of personal responsibility, or with the theory of charismatic leadership” (5). However, Butler cautions that too much focus on the terrorists’ individual motives doesn’t require us to inquire any further into the geopolitical conditions to which the attacks might have responded (which is doubtless the intention of some on the right all along, in their efforts to blame 9/11 on rogue actors).

Therefore, Butler claims that “we need to situate individual responsibility in light of its collective conditions” (15), the ethical work that all discourse ought to take up in discussing 9/11. “These individuals are formed, and we would be making a mistake if we reduced their actions to purely self-generated acts of will or symptoms of individual pathology of ‘evil’” (15). Neoliberalism’s global socioeconomic conditions may in fact be the necessary cause for Al Qaeda terrorism; therefore, we need to understand “not only how it is experienced by those who understand themselves as its victims, but how it enters into their own formation as acting and deliberating subjects” (11). After all, it is ultimately an ethical responsibility for each and every one of us to decide how we act in the midst of conditions that might compel some to respond to victimization with violence.
In considering our own potential for violence, Butler urges that we should also consider the Other’s circumstances of victimization, and the extent to which we are responsible for creating those conditions in the first place. This is an uneasy and politically inexpedient operation for politicians to perform, let alone to acknowledge publicly, and it’s easier in effect to denounce the killers as criminals outright, and to deny any semblance of victimhood to them. However, the fiction writer is much freer to take up this task of narrativizing the conditions for terrorism, answering Butler’s call to create a narrative of what went through Mohammed Atta’s mind.

On one hand, fiction may humanize the terrorist, complicating the melodramatic caricatures that would otherwise be drawn of him. While this fictive exploration may seem politically subversive, though, Butler warns that the personalization of the terrorist may still efface the deeper sociopolitical conditions that may have compelled him to resort to violence.\(^5\) As E. Ann Kaplan points out in *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, the focus on the individuals’ suffering encourages the viewer to identify only with those individuals, to “enter into their experiences rather than to think about what we are looking at, or to engage on any larger intellectual or analytical level” (99). Fiction, in this sense, may then be seen as a conservative strategy of containment for subversive impulses. Fiction may resign the readers merely to accept the widespread injustices of the global sociopolitical system in which they are positioned, and which no single person can do much of anything to fix. The reader might also just as easily regard the fiction as mere entertainment (no matter how much referential realism is employed), which they are free to disregard at any point, and indeed that may be the motivation for picking up the book in the first place.\(^6\)
contend, though, that while political action by the audience does not necessarily follow from the consciousness-raising that fiction can offer, such revelations can at least raise the audience’s awareness of the complexity of the global sociopolitical system (American neocolonialism, neoliberalism, etc.) in which they are positioned, and at least serve as occasion to contemplate alternative courses of action.

Can a similar appeal be made in post-9/11 fiction for an Arab Muslim man who resorts to terrorism, then? In some obvious ways, it seems like quite a stretch to analogize Mohammed Atta with a fictional protagonist-turned-killer such as Bigger Thomas. In a moral sense, there may no grounds for comparison at all. Bigger commits his first murder, which sets him on his disastrous course, by accident, and none of the violence he commits is premeditated. In another obvious sense, the violence committed by a young, urban, poor, black man in the 1930s is of a different degree and kind altogether from the suicide bombing done by a young, urban, middle-class, Saudi man in the 2000s. The social, historical, economic, political, and cultural factors are entirely different between Wright’s America and, say, that of a Saudi émigré in the U.S. in 2001.

Yet, in his explanatory essay “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright presciently acknowledges that there are geopolitical parallels that can be drawn between disaffected youth with violent impulses in any modern society. Al Qaeda’s terrorist violence (for all else it purports to be) can undeniably be seen as a reaction against economic inequality and uneven development in the neoliberal world of the twenty-first century. Numerous journalists and scholars have claimed that the young men (and it is almost always young men) who are drawn to radical Islamist causes are almost always unemployed or faced with limited career opportunities in their own countries. By
comparison, Wright claims that Bigger was born through his own experience as an impoverished black man in an urban environment, where the “intolerable sense of feeling and understanding so much, and yet living on a plane of social reality where the look of a world which one did not make or own” was all too clear to Wright from his own experiences, and which Wright said made him “grasp the revolutionary impulse in my life and the lives of those about me and far away” (443-44). In this sense, it’s not unreasonable to compare the Bigger Thomas of 1930s’ Chicago with the Jimmy Ahmed of 1960s’ Trinidad, as I do in Chapter 3.

What Wright does not do is focus on Bigger’s personal pathology itself. Wright gives us the background details of Bigger’s life in squalid detail, and he trusts that the picture he paints is vivid enough for his readers to make the connection between the miserable conditions and Bigger’s own desperation. If Wright were to only focus on Bigger’s immediate thought processes, we might very well only receive the psychological representation of a killer without a fuller view of the circumstances that surround him, which might foreclose any sympathy we’d have for someone in his situation. Crucially, Wright is concerned with creating a protagonist who experienced depravity similar to Wright’s own. The author’s sympathy for his characters makes all the difference. Wright believes that Bigger is, indeed, deserving of sympathy, even if he doesn’t openly solicit it. It would also be possible to treat the subject of Bigger, or any other killer-protagonist, with utter contempt, foreclosing any sympathy from the start, if he were shown to be the thorough product an irrational, virulent ideology. Perhaps what redeems Bigger, if anything, is his eventual penitence, and the possibility that Wright offers at the very end that Bigger, if he only had more time and better circumstances, could be reformed.
Yet it is also possible to portray a truly malignant killer, who bears an irrational hatred of all others, while also paying attention to the toxic conditions of the society that deformed him. This dual approach—environmental degradation and personal pathology, and the synergy between the two—is exactly what Martin Amis has taken in portraying the 9/11 hijackers. Amis’s short story “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” is an unrelentingly caustic portrayal of the leader of the group, and in its taut narrative, Amis refuses to give even a hint of sympathy for his subject. Amis accounts vaguely for the conditions that spawn Islamist extremism, but he has nothing but disdain and fear for those subjects who are deformed by them. In focusing on the personal pathologies of his protagonist, Amis limits himself to giving a narrowly refracted view of the conditions that surround 9/11—precisely the operation which Butler cautions against.

Atta operates purely in the realm of the physical and psychological, and Amis makes us privy to these limited dimensions in explicit detail. Yet, the only insight Amis offers us into the broader sociopolitical conditions which lead Atta to act is his observation that “jihad” is “the most charismatic idea of his generation” (99). There are many other young men like him, such as his eighteen other co-conspirators, who pursue their mission for avowedly religious or political reasons, yet these reasons are only hinted at in Amis’s focus on Atta in all his solipsism. Yet this solipsism is precisely Amis’s point in writing about “Islamism.” Such nihilistic violence has no works upon earth except destruction. It has no rational, attainable, or justifiable motives. The men who are drawn to it are solipsists like Atta who can’t imagine any more constructive means to vent their rage. As he does in his other political writings, Amis stands as a staunch defender of Western liberalism, and fears Islamism as yet another incarnation of a mass
nihilistic movement, directly in line with Nazism and Bolshevism, that would destroy Western society. He claims that “[m]illennial Islamism is an ideology superimposed upon a religion—illusion upon illusion. It is not merely violent in tendency. Violence is all that is there” (89). Therefore, there can be no broader analysis of geopolitical conditions for him, and indeed he claims that geopolitics is not his “natural subject” right up front in his “Authors Note” to the volume (x). Instead, Amis provides a triumphalist validation of Western liberalism that stands as perpetual target of Islamist violence.

If Michael Ignatieff were to write story in which he let his political use of “evil” play out, he couldn’t have done much better than Amis. “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” is a fascinating study of a character that is set up to be detestable to his audience right from the start. With this story, Amis offered to fill in the gaps of knowledge of Atta’s routines in the days immediately before the September 11 attacks, providing, as he does so, a caustically bitter portrait of a man with a host of personal problems. By turns, Atta is shown to be antisocial, misogynistic, atheistic, apolitical, dyspeptic, and, perhaps most shockingly, boring. (Amis goes so far as to show us Atta on the toilet on the morning of September 11, trying to purge himself of his five-month constipation). This is the truth that we need to know about Mohammed Atta the way that Amis sees it, which neither the 9/11 Commission Report nor monographs on terrorism or Islamist extremism can even attempt to portray. Amis humanizes that particular terrorist in his story, but he does so in a way that renders his subject all the more alien and repulsive to the reader of The New Yorker whom Amis is primarily addressing. This is not just a misguided person following a bad ideology; this is a bad person and we can all recognize it. But,
importantly, he’s made bad by his stunted intellectual development as a self-loathing young man who was readily recruited by Islamist radicals.

Moreover, Amis’s condemnation of his subject is grounded in humanistic, sentimental appeal to the “value of life.” Atta’s victims are in the background, and we never actually see them, except through their elided presence in Atta’s thought processes in the moments before the attack. Yet, these victims are conspicuously present in their absence. Amis intends his readers to despise Atta for his solipsistic hatred of his victims, and of us. He hates the good life that we all enjoy, and the fact alone of his hatred of self and all others makes him irredeemably repulsive to us. Amis’s appeal to the value of life is a universalizing claim, but Amis’s avowed subject position is that of an embattled liberal who hates and fears Islamism. This is not a controversial position to take, and it would be hard not to loathe Atta for all that we know he did. The ground on which Amis stands to condemn Atta, though, is that of an enlightened Western liberal subject who understands and embraces life and love and lust and leisure, all of the things that Atta despises. Amis parleys the earthly pleasures that Atta militantly represses against him, and in so doing makes him unbridgeably alien to us. Some of us may have the same hang-ups as Atta, but, rest assured, none of us living in the West will ever fall as far as Atta has. Amis never uses the term “evil” as Ignatieff offers it, since he is rigorously committed to materialist explanations, but his view of the irrational pathologies of Atta, which are also those of Islamism, that cannot be rationally explained, functions in precisely the way that “evil” does for Ignatieff.

Where Amis weights the scales against his protagonist out of disdain for Atta’s personal pathology and his Islamist worldview from the start, Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*
represents the entire quandary of terrorism structurally and aesthetically. DeLillo equates the social and emotional alienation of Hammad, his rendering of one of the 9/11 hijackers, with Keith Neudecker, DeLillo’s protagonist who escaped from the Twin Towers moments before their collapse. In universalizing the experience of postmodern alienation between two different cultures, DeLillo offers the possibility that liberal-humanistic understanding would serve as a corrective to neoliberalism’s anti-humanist mechanisms. As we stand opposed to one another now, DeLillo shows, we can never truly know “why they hate us.” Yet what makes all of us similar is a pre-political desire for social and emotional fulfillment through the community that the neoliberal system, in effect, dissipates. DeLillo’s narrative is then committed to showing the fragments of this would-be community of the alienated. In principle, this is a more progressive move than Amis makes, who takes an outright reactionary opposition, as a Western liberal, to the Islamists. DeLillo’s universalizing on the basis of social and emotional alienation alone is an oblique critique of the neoliberal system in its complexity, in which both Hammad and Keith are merely nodes.

As DeLillo has done throughout the entire corpus of his work, he explores the alienating effects of modern technology, and postmodern society in general, upon the individual. Where Amis sees technological advancement as the necessary condition for enlightened societies, and, thus, happier and more intelligent individuals, DeLillo sees technology as stultifying and dehumanizing the individual. DeLillo suggests that postmodern society produces alienated and potentially violent individuals in American society just as it does in Middle Eastern society, as both are subsumed in the neoliberal system. Al Qaeda’s violence, then, is an anti-modern reaction to the American fetish of
technology, which hearkens back to pre-modern impulses for violence. Al Qaeda “see[s] something innately destructive in the nature of technology. It brings death to their customs and beliefs. Use it as what it is, a thing that kills,” which seems opposed to Western ignorance, or hypocrisy, about such devices (“Ruins” 38). In DeLillo’s view, then, the ways of life in Western society kill the individual morally, spiritually, and in some cases physically. Keith’s office job had sapped the life out of him, and he immersed himself in gambling that became an addiction for him in his post-traumatic state.

DeLillo is committed to showing the similarities between the young men drawn to Al Qaeda and the Westerner subjects they’re determined to kill. In stark contrast to Amis, DeLillo offers a sympathetic representation of one of the youngest and most vulnerable of the 9/11 hijackers, precisely by equating him to his Western counterpart. DeLillo says his vision of Hammad formed as he “tried to imagine how a man might begin as a secular individual and then discover religion, always through the power of deep companionship with other men” (“Deconstructed”). In this sense, DeLillo takes on the same imaginative task that John Updike did in writing Terrorist, imagining the subject-position of Ahmad, a teenage boy in the postmodern world, some two generations younger than his own. However, DeLillo opens himself up to the exact critique made of Updike—that all of these characters are merely the same alienated, Western, white, male subjects that populate all of DeLillo’s and Updike’s other books. Their different ethnicities and religions are merely cosmetic appurtenances to the same stock characters. These are merely monads, then, and not fully realized characters who would act in the ways that actual young Middle Eastern Muslim men would act. Indeed, DeLillo has been criticized for decades for creating two-dimensional characters who speak in highly
contrived dialogues that DeLillo designs to express explicitly his own thoughts on various postmodern phenomena. DeLillo leaves Hammad open to such criticism due to the relatively small portion of *Falling Man* devoted to him. Hammad’s appearance and manners are only vaguely described; he is a “bulky man, clumsy,” with “some unnamed energy…sealed in his body, too tight to be released” (79). He has all the recognizable hang-ups of any nineteen-year-old boy, and the most memorable aspects of his manners are scatological: “Late one night he had to step over the prone form of a brother in prayer as he made his way to the toilet to jerk off” (80). Such details are necessary for showing Hammad’s role as an alienated subject, desperately desiring social community and yet never quite in line with his comrades. DeLillo is not interested at all in the religious, ethnic, and cultural components of his character. Rather, Hammad serves a purely instrumental role in conveying this theme of alienation, and DeLillo expends no effort in drawing him out any further.

DeLillo contrasts Hammad’s calm anticipation of the impending attack with the trauma of the attack’s victims afterwards. Keith is a primary victim of the attack, having narrowly escaped the tower and having lost his best friend in their offer, and his actions show all of the symptoms of one radically emotionally decentered. His estranged wife Lianne is vicariously traumatized (to use Kaplan’s term) through her proximity to the attacks and to Keith. She lives in dread of Keith, for her son, and for their futures. While DeLillo shows Keith’s despondency, we also see the violence that erupts from his trauma. After the attack, Keith is subject to fits of sudden violence. In their final conversation in the novel before he finally abandons his wife and son, Lianne acknowledges Keith’s murderous impulse: “You want to kill somebody….You’ve
wanted this for some time…I don’t know how it works or how it feels. But it’s a thing you carry with you” (214). This irremediable distance between Keith and Lianne through their differing experiences of trauma comes down to the fact that “[s]he wanted to be safe in the world and he did not” (216). The simplifying discipline of ritual ties Keith and Hammad together thematically. In his despondency, Keith needs “an offsetting discipline, a form of controlled behavior, voluntary, that kept him from shambling into the house hating everybody” (143). DeLillo hereby draws a parallel between the terrorists’ plot and Keith’s poker games. Lianne likens televised poker games to “a séance in hell. Tick tock tick tock. What happens after months of this? Or years. Who do you become?” (216). Keith’s commitment to the game of poker mirrors Hammad’s commitment to the plot, giving both structure and meaning to their lives and enabling both to cut off all social and emotional connection to the extraneous others in their lives. Thus, DeLillo switches the roles of terrorist and victim, as the terrorist lives the sanctified life and the victim reacts violently and self-destructively.

In perhaps the neatest narrative trick DeLillo employs, he draws Hammad and Keith together in the exact moment of the plane’s impact: “A bottle fell off the counter in the galley, on the other side of the aisle, and he watched it roll this way and that, a water bottle, empty, making an arc one way and rolling back the other, and he watched it spin more quickly and then skitter across the floor an instant before the aircraft struck the tower, heat, then fuel, then fire, and a blast wave passed through the structure that sent Keith Neudecker out of his chair and into a wall” (239). Hammad’s subjectivity disappears in this exact moment, segueing seamlessly into Keith’s immediate impressions as he escapes from the tower in the novel’s final pages. In the actual chronology of events
in the novel, Keith’s traumatized self is the narrative continuation of Hammad. Hammad’s story as flashback is spliced into the present-tense narrative of Keith, Lianne, and their family after the attacks. Narratively, his story comes before any of the others and disappears just as the others’ are taken up. The reader does not realize this until the final pages of the novel, and DeLillo brings together all these pieces to show not only how one person’s life becomes interchangeable with another’s in the event of the terrorist attack, but how one person’s alienation leads directly to another’s.

DeLillo offers a nuanced corrective to the typical recovery narratives that came out in the years after 9/11. In an obvious sense, Keith’s life as we hear about it before the attacks and as we see it unravel afterwards would belie any tidy patriotically tinged obituary that could be given in the *New York Times* “Portraits of Grief” series. Keith never was, and will not be, a saint, and we are left to believe that Keith will be damaged for the rest of his life as he abandons his family and sinks into the world of gambling. DeLillo is profoundly unsentimental in his treatment of the traumatized victim of the attacks—we can feel sympathy for Keith in his trauma, but there is no amelioration of his or his family’s condition. Moreover, we see Keith become the aggressor through his eruptions of irrational violence. Likewise, DeLillo doesn’t sentimentalize his killer, Hammad, either. Hammad can hardly be considered evil in the way that Amis’s Atta easily could, and what limited scenes DeLillo gives of him reveals him to be an insecure, socially awkward, sexually repressed young man, a type relatable to most any reader. However, Hammad becomes a killer regardless, and his transformation into one through his allegiance to the plot that inures him from sympathy for others forecloses readerly sympathy for him.
*Falling Man* deals with the loss of human agency in the postmodern world and the struggle to regain control of that agency. In this desire, which is beset on all sides, DeLillo offers the hope, often unrealized, that liberal humanism could serve as a corrective to neoliberalism’s anti-humanist mechanisms. In effect, in *Falling Man*, DeLillo proposes a liberalism of vulnerability, offering the broad view that even though neoliberalism alienates all of humanity, we’re all united and all vulnerable in our alienation. In her essay “Violence, Mourning, and Politics,” Judith Butler suggests that “when we think about who we ‘are’ and seek to represent ourselves, we cannot represent ourselves as merely bounded beings”; we have all suffered hurt and losses in our pasts, and we are “periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded” (28). Butler proposes the recognition that everyone is vulnerable to being hurt by anyone else, and that we all have the potential to become radically undone and decentered, as the ethical basis of any political community. This seems to be the possibility for social redemption that DeLillo offers as well. No one can deny that hurt and loss are universal experiences, but the call for these experiences to serve as the basis for political community is a purely sentimental appeal, offering consolation for public injustices committed in the system in which one is also complicit.

The furthest end of the fictive spectrum, then, would be to offer a fully sympathetic appeal to the Qaeda subject, and a condemnation of the reader as perpetrator of abuses. Mohsin Hamid comes close to doing this in his 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The story takes the form of the extended, monological confession of the Pakistani-American man Changez to an unnamed, presumably American man whom Changez addresses in the second-person, thus making a proximate address to the reader
as well. Much like Mohsin Hamid himself, Changez was born in Pakistan but educated at Princeton, and he worked throughout his twenties at an appraisal firm in New York. The turning point in Changez’s narrative comes when the 9/11 attacks hit, and Changez is surprised to find that he actually felt joy in seeing the events unfold. Changez tells his auditor, “I smiled. Yes, despicable as that may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased” (72). He then quickly hedges, though: “[y]our disgust is evident; indeed, your large hand has, perhaps without your noticing, clenched into a fist. But please believe me when I tell you that I am no sociopath; I am not indifferent to the suffering of others” (ibid.).

Changez insists, however, that “at that moment, my thoughts were not with the victims of the attack—death on television moves me most when it is fictitious and happens to characters with whom I have built up relationships over multiple episodes—no, I was caught up in the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (73). However, Changez quickly turns the tables on his auditor: “surely you cannot be completely innocent of such feelings yourself. Do you feel no joy at the video clips—so prevalent these days—of American munitions laying waste the structures of your enemies?” (ibid.). As a recent college graduate and young professional, Changez’s “fundamentalism” at first took the form of data analysis for his firm, obviously mirroring a radical religious creed: “[o]ur creed was one which valued above all else maximum productivity, and such a creed was for me doubly reassuring because it was quantifiable—and hence knowable—in a period of great uncertainty, and because it remained utterly convinced of the possibility of progress while others longed for a sort of classical period that had come and gone, if it had ever existed at all” (116-
In the months before 9/11, though, Changez comes to see himself as “a modern-day
janissary,” a “servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country
with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country
faced the threat of war” (152). Changez confesses to his auditor that he had always
resented Americans’ entitlement and U.S. military and economic domination and
manipulation of nations worldwide, and thus he quits his job and eventually moves back
to Pakistan when his complicity in this system becomes untenable for him.

Yet, crucially, this is not a Qaeda operative that Hamid presents us with. This is a
young American of international background, who had thoroughly immersed himself in
American culture and a bourgeois lifestyle as an Ivy League yuppie in his twenties, living
large in Manhattan. He had an interracial, interfaith relationship with a girlfriend with
whom he becomes estranged, and she eventually drowns herself when the pressures of
facing the social disapproval of defending Changez become too much for her, once he
becomes outspokenly critical of American politics and culture after 9/11. Thus, Changez
experiences emotional pain that he recounts in his narrative due to the social toll his
newly forged identity takes as a dissenting Pakistani Muslim in America. Yet, Changez’s
critical views are not unusual nor irrational, and are actually indistinguishable from the
mainstream liberal critiques of U.S. foreign policy made by Noam Chomsky and Susan
Sontag. In the final pages of the novel, Changez acknowledges the creeping fear that he
feels in sensing that his auditor may not have been so sympathetic in listening to him all
along: “[i]t seems an obvious thing to say, but you should not imagine that we Pakistanis
are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all
undercover assassins” (183). In the novel’s final turn of plot, Changez calmly realizes
that he is in the process of being arrested by his auditor and the undercover agent posing as a waiter in the café.

Hamid’s novel implicates the reader as the one who pulls out the handcuffs and shackles the narrator, as if in a literal staging of the societal policing to contain subversive threats that David A. Miller says is inherent in Victorian novels. Yet by the end of the novel, Hamid intends readerly sympathies to align with Changez, who has shown himself to be one of us with familiar social and emotional pressures, though he’s confessing freely his antipathy for the West in the moments before his arrest. The reader is left to imagine where Changez will be taken, where detained, what tortures inflicted, now that we see he’s innocent of any crime. Hamid compels the reader to imagine the thousands like him who are imprisoned without trial on mere suspicion of terrorist activities in the years after 9/11. The reader can no longer rest assured that actual criminals are being arrested and imprisoned if we can imagine Changez’s case to be one of many.

Is Hamid’s appeal on Western terms to liberal-humanistic sentiment for these characters conservative or subversive in its essence? Is our mode of feeling for the victims of injustice essentially being validated at no disruption to the underlying systematic injustices? Or is our sentiment being co-opted to compel us to consider alternatives? These are all important questions to ask of any text that co-opts readerly sympathies, but also of any public statement made through violence or on violence, that would provoke an emotional reaction. The terrorism novel, in the midst of the ongoing, spectral war on terror, must compel the reader to contemplate the indefinable nature of terrorism in new ways that are not readily shaped by the public discourse. The terrorism
novel’s task of compelling contemplation must do the work of denaturalizing the
spectacle of the terrorist attack, showing the signifying operations of the phobic object of
the attack to be merely determined by social and political forces. The terrorism novel
must do the work of revealing the theatrical dimensions of the terrorist act, as both the
agents of violence and the regime in reaction seek to manipulate societal behavior and
private emotion in order to advance political agendas. And the terrorism novel must do
the work of revealing the power of the terrorist label to demonize, conferring upon the
criminal a power to harm far disproportionate to his actual means, and upon the innocent
a stigma far beyond anything that can be remedied, in both cases unearned and
undeserved.
NOTES

Introduction: The Emotional Charge of Terrorism in Fiction

1 Even when resorting to a strictly political or social-scientific mode of analysis, one gets bogged down in all manner of overlapping and conflicting ways to explain the phenomenon of terrorism. Indeed, discourses on political violence can take widely divergent approaches to analyze the phenomenon. In terrorism discourse, the “diagnostic view” holds that political violence is committed by political subjects with rationally guided motives and quantifiable objectives, who only resort to terroristic violence once all other options are exhausted, or because they believe that changing the rules of the game and pursuing politics by other means is the quickest and most compelling way to gain recognition for one’s grievances (Apter 7). By contrast, the “individual pathological view” sees disaffected persons of abnormal psychology as the ones most likely to resort to terrorism, regardless of the validity of their protest in the eyes of others (ibid.). The “social pathological view,” then, sees political oppression and social injustice causing people to resort to violence, acting as malformed products of their own poisoned environments (ibid.). However, these differing paradigms can also be seen to overlap with and complicate each other. For instance, people who might, somehow, be considered pathologically disturbed can actually make rational calculations to commit politically motivated violence. Furthermore, oppressive social conditions might account for the fact that otherwise rational-minded people are, in fact, emotionally disturbed. Moreover, an act of political violence may have multiple motivations by multiple peoples behind it. Some members of a group may be driven by purely politically motivated grievances and the desire to emancipate members of their social group, while some others in that group may be motivated by sheer bloodlust. These differing motivations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and can all be made to work in concert with each other in certain situations. Social-scientific methods for analyzing and dealing with terrorism may be stymied in accounting for the phenomenon in all its complexity.

2 Certain agents may use the “terrorist” label to their own advantage, in harnessing all the sensational fear that it may evoke. While the nonpolitical homicide may cause waves of fear in his own immediate vicinity, the terrorist poses a sensational threat to his or her society at large, which could render such crimes all the more horrific, their actions all the more powerful.

3 It is important to note, however, that right-wing terrorism, as part of the counter-terror measures executed by government police agencies such as the Okhrana of Tsarist Russia, was also directed against civilians and public figures, with the intent of inciting public outrage at the radical groups they were trying to police. I treat state-level terror, the system of nationwide fear engendered by the police state, which is endemic but not limited to totalitarian regimes, as another matter altogether, which I will discuss in specific detail in Chapter 2.

4 Terrorism scholar Walter Laqueur claims that “[t]errorism always assumes the protective coloring of certain features of the Zeitgeist, which was Fascist in the 1920s and 1930s, but took a different [i.e., left-wing] direction in the 1960s and 1970s” (172). Certainly, the Fascists’ antisemitic violence in the 1920s and 1930s is a prime example of right-wing terrorism that served powerful social and political interests even before the Nazi regime came to power.

5 Bruce Hoffman credits the late-nineteenth-century bombing campaigns of the Irish Fenians and the Clan na Gael (the United Irishmen) as the first cases of terrorism that were truly international in scope. These nationalist groups’ allies and sympathizers were widespread throughout the West, including the United States, and Patrick Ford, editor of the nationalist Irish World journal, was perhaps the first figure to call for an ongoing, concerted global campaign of terrorism, in which “skirmishers” would fight English interests all over the world (8).
It’s debatable as to whether groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, whose aims are purportedly social and political, are different from seemingly religiously motivated groups like Al Qaeda. Mahmood Mamdani claims that all terrorist groups have political motives in response to very real political concerns, whereas Faisal Devji believes that Al Qaeda is essentially apolitical, and concerned not with actual geopolitical gains but with changing the ethical conversation surrounding geopolitical power relations.

In *The Age of Terrorism*, Laqueur does not explain his grounds for disavowing terrorism’s existence in totalitarian societies. This may be a facetious act on his part, in perhaps drawing attention to the totalitarian regimes’ total control of all official media, and their careful filtration of the information that is made available to the public. In any case, Laqueur would seem to discount the resistance movements within Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied territories which resorted to assassination attempts on Hitler and other public figures—a form of terrorism against a repugnant form of oppression that many people would consider morally justified, and perhaps even morally demanded. This case particularly illustrates how the moral judgment of what constitutes terrorism is entirely a matter of political perspective.

One memorable illustration of the criteria that enables certain types of violence to be labeled “terrorism” but not others comes from the TV series *The Wire*. At the end of the show’s first season, filmed in 2002, an FBI committee refuses to get involved in an ongoing investigation of drug-trafficking gangs in the Baltimore slums because the case doesn’t involve terrorism, the hot topic of the day that all federal agencies were ordered to make their top priority. Stonewalled, police detective McNulty bursts out that several hundred murders occur on the Baltimore streets every year due to drug-related gang violence, that that’s “terrorism” for you. The FBI agents tell McNulty that he’s stretching it with this definition, implying that urban gang murders just don’t have the same public resonance as other murders do, such as those committed by Al Qaeda that really do terrify the public and are seen as a far more imminent danger. Here, it’s all a matter of who the victims are—white businesspeople as opposed to black inner-city youth—that constitutes the act of violence that can henceforth be referred to as “terrorism.”

This is precisely the logic that enabled Weather Underground leader Bill Ayers to claim there was no equivalence between the effects of his bombing of the Pentagon, which injured no one but disabled the building’s computer systems for one day, and the U.S. military’s massive bombing campaigns over Vietnam and Cambodia which killed and maimed hundreds of thousands. By this rationale, terrorism can serve as a means for the powerless to voice their dissent against the all-powerful state in a way that cannot be ignored.

For political criticisms of terrorism that specifically reference Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* as an illustrative, fictive analogue to the political critique of terrorism these critics are making, see Walter Laqueur’s *The Age of Terrorism* (1987), Jean Baudrillard’s *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2001), Michael Ignatieff’s *The Lesser Evil* (2004), Terry Eagleton’s *Holy Terror* (2005), and Michael Burleigh’s *Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism* (2009), to name just a few. On the other side of the political spectrum, Conrad has also been similarly appraised in the government arena. In 1974, a witness for U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Internal Security recommended that law enforcement officials turn to *The Secret Agent* for the key to understanding the terrorist mind. “Conrad tried to get into the human mind of an anarchist living in London in the early 1900s,” the witness said; “[i]f a police officer could read this, he could start understanding how much a revolutionary is really motivated by political ideology and how much by human needs” (qtd. in Laqueur 195). And then, of course, the Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski professed to admire *The Secret Agent*’s Professor as hero, and had a copy of the novel with him in his Montana cabin when he was captured in 1995.

For cogent critiques of the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and mass media, see Jean Baudrillard’s *Fatal Strategies* (1983), John Orr and Dragan Klaič’s *Terrorism and Modern Drama* (1990), and Kia Lindroos’s “The Aura of Terror” (2008).
In his “Letter to D’Alembert,” Rousseau famously claimed: “I hear it said that tragedy conduces to pity through terror; granted, but what is this pity? A transitory and vain emotion that lasts no longer than the illusion that produced it; a residue of natural sentiment soon smothered by the passions; a sterile pity that gluts itself on a few tears and has never produced the least act of humanity” (qtd. in Samet 1307). In his letter, Rousseau offers the allegory of the prisoner who, while behind bars, witnesses a child outside being torn apart by a wild beast. Rousseau credits the prisoner’s grief as the most pure form of sympathy, since it is given freely by someone who has nothing to gain through this emotional expenditure. However, the sympathy is as impotent as it is pure precisely because the prisoner is powerless, and has no obligation to act to save the child. Such is the case with theater as well, Rousseau urges, where the sympathy that may be instilled by the spectacle is ephemeral for the viewers, and lasts no longer than the spectacle itself.

Lionel Trilling, then credited James for conveying both moral realism and social realism in his novel. In Trilling’s view, James showed a psychologically sophisticated “imagination of disaster” which surpassed that of any of his contemporaries. Thus, James captured the zeitgeist of a decaying Europe, dramatizing “the assumption that Europe...is passing over into roteness,” and that Europe “may meet its end by violence” (151). In the novel, Hyacinth’s conflicted desires for both social justice and artistic beauty shows that James is “dealing reasonably with anarchist belief” (159). James accurately captured the “the misery and downtroddenness...when strong and gifted personalities are put at a hopeless disadvantage, and about the possibilities of extreme violence, and about the sense of guilt and unreality which may come to members of the upper classes and the strange complex efforts they make to find innocence and reality” (151). Of particular contemporary relevance, Trilling claimed that James is “immediately relevant” to the Cold War era precisely through his “imagination of disaster” along with a clear vision of the cultural achievements of a society that are in danger in being destroyed (177).

Conrad appraised his own ability in writing the novel to imaginatively portray all of the terrorist elements therein in light of the compliments he received from readers presumably more familiar with the political intrigues therein. In his 1920 Author’s Note, he claimed that “an experienced man of the world” said that “Conrad must have been in touch with that sphere or else has an excellent intuition of things” because the foreign secretary Mr. Vladimir, who commissioned the bombing of the observatory in the novel, was “not only possible in detail but quite right in essentials” (xxxviii). Furthermore, Conrad claims that “a visitor from America” told him that “all sorts of revolutionary refugees in New York would have it that the book was written by somebody who knew a lot about them” (ibid.). Conrad said that this particular comment was “a very high compliment, considering that, as a matter of hard fact,” Conrad had “seen even less of their kind than the omniscient friend who gave me the first suggestion for the novel” (xxxix).

Chapter 1: “The Spirit of Revolution” and “The Phrases of Sham Sentiment”: Melodrama and Irony in Conrad’s Novels of Terrorism

In Conrad’s “Author’s Note” to the 1919 edition of A Personal Record, he famously disavows claims to the “revolutionary” nature of his father’s activities in the failed Polish insurrection of 1863 which led to his parents’ exile. Regarding the claim made by one of his “most sympathetic critics” that Conrad was the “son of a Revolutionist,” he claimed that “No epithet could be more inappplicable to a man with such a strong sense of responsibility in the region of ideas and action and so indifferent to the promptings of personal ambition as my father.” Conrad claims that a political actor, such as his father, who works to free his homeland from the unjust oppression by an alien power, should not be called a “revolutionary.” Notice that Conrad credited his father with holding ideas for which he took full responsibility in carrying out into practice. As will be discussed further, Conrad believed that most revolutionaries do not hold ideas for which they can take any sort of responsibility.

Edward Jenkins’s A Week of Passion, Or, the Dilemma of Mr. George Barton the Younger (1884), Tom Greer’s A Modern Daedalus (1885), Donald MacKay’s The Dynamite Ship (1888), and George Griffith’s The Angel of the Revolution (1893) are works of popular British fiction, “terrorist novels” some of which bordered on science fiction, published during the greatest wave of the dynamite attacks, which portrayed the dynamiters as heroic champions of the oppressed, and which contributed to the repository of ideas in the popular British imagination about anarchists by the time Conrad wrote The Secret Agent in 1907.
With Conrad criticism growing throughout the second half of the twentieth century, critics as early as Eloise Knapp Hay’s 1963 *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad* have often resorted to labeling a standard set of Conrad’s novels and novellas “political,” particularly *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes*. The standard rationale that critics offer is typically a version of Irving Howe’s definition of the “political novel” as a work in which the theme of politics is dominant (see Howe’s *Politics and the Novel*, 1957). What counts as the “dominance” of a theme is, of course, a matter of subjective interpretation, and politics can certainly be seen to play a significant role in many more, if not all, of Conrad’s works. Politics, of course, is a major concern in Conrad’s novels of radicalism that I discuss, and therefore *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* can and should be deemed “political novels.”

Brooks offers a brief yet intriguing analysis of political melodrama in his own historical moment. Brooks argues that Gerald Ford’s claim, upon acceding to the presidency upon Richard Nixon’s 1974 resignation after Watergate, that “our national nightmare is over,” is an exemplary instance of political discourse being figured in terms of melodrama (203-204). Brooks claims that Ford’s figuration of the Watergate crisis as “nightmare” had the “unconscious virtue of situating such an episode as Watergate in the proper aesthetic and cultural interpretive framework, identifying it as melodrama rather than tragedy,” in that “melodrama regularly simulates the experience of nightmare, where virtue…lies supine, helpless, while menace plays out its occult designs” (204). Brooks claims that the “end of the nightmare is an awakening brought about by confrontation and expulsion of the villain [i.e., Nixon], the person in whom all evil is seen to be concentrated, and a reaffirmation of the society of ‘decent people,’” a symbolic resolution that would have appealed to an American public at the time. The fact that Ford would later pardon Nixon would violate melodrama’s terms for “retributive justice,” thus showing melodrama to be an illusory construct in the context of politics. I contend that Conrad, in his fiction, was just as aware as Brooks, in his theory, that people and political calculations cannot be made to fit melodrama’s simplifying figurations in the context of political discourse.

Conrad offered perhaps his most compassionate presentation of the anarchist as being driven by genuine humanitarian sympathies in his short story “An Anarchist: A Desperate Tale,” written at the same time as “The Informer” and published in the same volume. In this story, the fugitive anarchist Paul, once a workaday Parisian mechanic, tell how he once expressed his hatred of society’s gross inequalities and his heartfelt sympathies for the poor, in a drunken rant in a bar. Egged on by the anarchists in his company, he repeatedly shouts “*Vive l’anarchie!* Death to the capitalists!” (147). This momentary outburst of drunken sentiment gets the otherwise apolitical Paul arrested and recruited by a group of anarchists whom Paul later regards as no better than “housebreakers” (149). In his final assessment, the story’s narrator claims that Paul “was very much like many other anarchists”: “[w]arm heart and weak head…and it is a fact that the bitterest contradictions and the deadliest conflicts of the world are carried on in every individual breast capable of feeling and passion” (160-61). Conrad’s story shows that the rhetoric of genuine humanitarianism is readily appropriated by both radical and reactionary parties. The sentiment of the orator may be genuine, but it gets re-routed all too easily to serve the means of the radicals (with a less humanitarian agenda) and the state.

Throughout his life, Conrad would hold out steady hope for Polish independence that is born without bloodshed. In his 1919 essay “The Crime of Partition,” Conrad praises the Polish temperament that stood fast through the First World War to enable a provisional but short-lived independence, in that, “[a]rms in hands, hopelessly or hopefully, and always against immeasurable odds, we did affirm ourselves and the justice of our cause; but wild justice has never been a part of our national manliness” (*Notes* 130). This “wild justice,” apparently, refers to acts of political violence.

It is one of the great coincidences of literary and political history that Lenin lived within a few blocks of Conrad in Geneva at the exact time that Conrad wrote *Under Western Eyes*. It is tantalizing for subsequent readers and critics to interpret *Under Western Eyes* in light of this dramatic, historical irony—posing Conrad as a prescient forecaster of the October Revolution of 1917—which is made possible in this text only by mere coincidence.
It is often for this cynical foreclosure of the possibilities of reform that Conrad has been deemed profoundly conservative by many critics, though this would seem to discount Conrad’s pervasive criticism of traditional British social and political institutions in many of his works.

In his 1920 “Author’s Note” to The Secret Agent, Conrad facetiously claimed that “I have no doubt...that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won’t say more convinced than they but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them had ever done in the whole course of his life” (xxxix). In Conrad’s logic here, if a revolutionist is supposed to exhibit a concerted purpose, the fact that none of them except for the Professor do, while Conrad claims that he did in writing the book, makes Conrad the true revolutionist through his role of author. It would be Conrad’s words, then, by this self-appraisal, that do not have the “sham meaning” that those of his sham anarchists do.

Throughout his works, Conrad presents his various other megalomaniacal characters as being admirably devoted to a cause, yet whose overreaching in the service of this cause brings about their decline or downfall. In Nostromo, the title character is devoted to protecting the Gould family’s fortune, only to become miserably corrupted by his coveting of that fortune. In Heart of Darkness, Kurtz is described as a brilliant expeditionary with captivating rhetorical powers, yet his obsession with ivory hunting leads him to abandon any vestiges of Western civilization altogether. The narrator Marlow, in turn, becomes captivated by his notion of the “voice,” the idea, of Kurtz, which steels Marlow’s resolve to gain so much as a simple audience with him, even at the expense of Marlow’s own life and the lives of his crew.

Conrad harshly criticized Rousseau for his lack of imagination, and called him an “artless moralist, as is clearly demonstrated by his anniversary being celebrated with marked emphasis by the heirs of the French Revolution, which was not a political movement at all, but a great outburst of morality” (A Personal Record 154-55). Conrad claimed that a writer’s “conscience, his deeper sense of things, lawful and unlawful, gives him his attitude before the world” and that morality is bound to the ways of the world, not from the “cold and immutable heaven” to which he claims Rousseau drew his inspiration (155). In one intriguing scene from Under Western Eyes, Razumov seeks solitude on Rousseau’s islet in Geneva, in which he writes his confessions beneath Rousseau’s statue. Caressed by the sounds of nature, Razumov finds momentary solace from the ever-tightening moral crisis borne out of his conflicted political and personal allegiances, which is Conrad’s satirical rebuke of Rousseau, whom he saw as blind to such moral impasses.

Though he denied that his father was a “revolutionary,” one wonders if Conrad thought of him as one of those with pure motives who was later betrayed in the struggle.

Instead, Conrad praises the realism of Henry James, whom he calls a “historian of fine consciences,” who delves into the moral quandaries of his characters of “fine conscience” and, in doing so, he renders faithfully the essential truths of the social world (“Henry James” 17). Rather than account for everything in exhaustive detail, James “has mastered the country, his domain, not wild indeed, but full of romantic glimpses, of deep shadows and sunny places” (ibid.). Conrad says that what “ugliness” there may be found in James’s writing “is always felt in the truthfulness of his art; it is there, it surrounds the scene, it presses close upon it. It is made visible, tangible, in the struggles, in the contacts of the fine consciences, in their perplexities, in the sophism of their mistakes” (17-18).

For decades, critics have credited Conrad’s irony with (1) offering a socially corrective view of the flawed or corrupt human institutions of his day (e.g., Eloise Knapp Hay), (2) as satirical entertainment that exposes the real evils of society to the savvy reader who knows this all along (e.g., Albert Guérard) or (3) despairing of the possibility that social and political realities can be changed at all (e.g., Anthony Winner). Winner claims that just as “a disfigured world mocks the idea” of benevolent human actions, then “Conrad’s irony can only succeed by mocking the mockery” (9). Winner claims that a radical nihilism is ultimately what Conrad’s deconstructive irony leaves us with—the suspicion that any ideas are sham ideas, however noble or ignoble their intention (14).
Indeed, Paul Fussell and other scholars of the First World War have pointed out the difficulty of mourning coherently for war casualties due to the unprecedented manners and extent of bodily injury and dismemberment seen throughout that war. The lack of an intact body over which families could mourn, in many senses, rendered nineteenth-century British and American rituals of mourning the war dead obsolete. According to Berthoud, Conrad intended the presentation of suffering in *The Secret Agent* to be “incompatible with a generalized or distant view of it,” which “in effect constitutes a rebuttal of the sentimentalism and patronage that characterizes well-bred sympathy” (113). Berthoud sees Stevie’s visceral reactions to real or conjectured human suffering—his fits and rages, his ‘angry Catherine wheels’—as much more genuine, the appropriate response to suffering, than the empty bourgeois gestures of sympathy (110).

Throughout his philosophical writings, David Hume sought to establish sentiment as the necessary condition for reason, and foundational for all forms of human experience. In *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume claimed that “Reason, being cool and disengaged, is no motive to action, and directs only the impulse received from appetite or inclination, by showing us the means of attaining happiness or avoiding misery”; therefore, “Taste, as it gives pleasure or pain, and thereby constitutes happiness or misery, becomes a motive to action, and is the first spring or impulse to desire and volition” (163). Thus, art’s appeal to the sentiments of taste can inspire one to action, in a visceral way that reason alone cannot. In this way, Philip Fisher claims that Hume’s argument in *A Treatise on Human Nature* “leads to the conclusion for aesthetics that art makes in some ways a more powerful demand when we are forced to supply unfelt passions than when we simply replicate what we see being felt by a person within a scene” ([b]143). Without specific reference to Hume, Conrad seemed to be offering up the possibility that “great art” can inspire the emotions that would otherwise be missing from mere quotidian accounts of casualties.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on sentiment in *Epistemology of the Closet* is especially enlightening here. Sedgwick argues that sentimentality is a matter of culturally determined attitudinal disposition, which is subject to potentially endless subjective variations, and which is bound to change over time. Sentiment is most suspect, and most “kitschy,” when its conventions become recognizable for its audience. Where one viewer may indulge in the sentiment of a certain film scene just as the director intended, another viewer may immediately intuit the emotional manipulation at play and ridicule the scene for its transparency.

This rumored connection of the bombing to anarchists was published in the newspapers and first transmitted to Conrad through Ford Madox Ford, whom Conrad assumed was in the know about such matters due to his dalliances with radical politics in Ford’s youth, but this connection was never officially verified. The actual circumstances behind the 1894 Greenwich Observatory bombing are lost to history; much like Winnie Verloc’s suicide by drowning in *The Secret Agent*, “an impenetrable mystery hangs over this [actual] act of madness and despair.”

Anthony Winner rightly calls Verloc’s “negation of all mankind’s efforts at effective meaning” the true anarchy of the novel, with much more power to harm than the sham efforts of his anarchist comrades or even the lawless egomaniacal fanaticism of the Professor (83-84).

Chapter 2: The Necessary Murder: Ideology and Moral Conflict in the Spanish Civil War

Fussell provides a fascinating list of the “raised,” “high” diction of Victorian and Edwardian historical romances published in the years prior to the First World War that euphemistically valorize the business of warfare: “comrade,” “fellowship,” “peril,” “vanquish,” “assail,” “gallant,” “the fallen,” “ardent,” “the summons,” “slumber,” “the heavens,” “radiant,” “base,” “the red/Sweet wine of youth” (21-22). These terms virtually overlap with the list of abstract terms in Victorian sentimental novels that Suzanne Clark provides in *Sentimental Modernism*: “benevolence, virtue, esteem, delicacy, transport, weakness, sweet, delicate, grateful, cruel, base, unkind, ungenerous, unfeeling” (22).
Fussell lumped Conrad in with this prewar generation of Victorian writers, who, along with Hardy and Kipling, conveyed “worlds of traditional moral action delineated in traditional moral language” (23). As I argue in my previous chapter, though, Conrad’s fiction cannot be understood as hewing to such a simple moral order, and Conrad goes to great lengths to reveal the moral ambiguities created by politics, the impossibility of committing to a cause without ambivalence, and the hypocrisies of political agents of all types in his time.

A crucial difference need be drawn between modern theorists of ideology like Bell and Howe and postmodern theorists like Althusser and Foucault. Consistent with modern views of political action, men as active agents commit to an ideology as a system of beliefs that is exogenous to them, that was formulated by others, and that needed to be discovered and consciously embraced, in the way that a convert embraces a religion. In the twentieth-century marketplace of ideologies, communism and fascism stood as a coherent set of beliefs alongside various forms of liberalism and anarchism. With its roots going at least as far back as Gramsci, though, the postmodern view holds that ideology is endogenous to all human social and political relations. As Althusser and Foucault, among many others, theorized, the human functions fundamentally as the subject of ideology. Althusser posited that the subject is interpellated by ideology, brought into social and political being by the ideological function that the subject performs in a society (see Lenin and Philosophy). Foucault posited that the subject is situated amidst a grid of power relations in any given society, and that all human actions are determined by subtle rather than overt forms of governmentality (see The History of Sexuality, Volume 1; Discipline and Punish; and his collected lectures published in the Collège de France Lectures series). Ideology is not a coherent system of beliefs to be discovered and consciously embraced by an agent, but a far more diffuse and ubiquitous system of power from which there can be no escape for its subjects. I will analyze the difference between modern and postmodern views of political action in detail in Chapters 3 and 4 herein.

See, for example, Martin Amis’s damning critique of Stalin as genocidal sociopath in Koba the Dread, Robert Gellately’s comparing of the Bolshevik leaders to Hitler as ideological demagogues riding the tide of social catastrophe in their respective societies in Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler, and Paul Berman’s yoking the European totalitarianisms together as ideological antecedents of millennial Islamism in Terror and Liberalism.

Of these 2,600 American volunteers in the so-called Abraham Lincoln Brigades (named for America’s first “Republican” president, of course) who first reached Spain in January 1937, roughly 800 died over the next two years (Carroll and Fernandez 14).

Stephen Koch’s excellent book, The Breaking Point: Hemingway, Dos Passos, and the Murder of José Robles, makes a compelling case for Stalin’s manipulating of the Spanish Civil War to strengthen his own geopolitical grip. Koch claims that the Popular Front, an ideological alliance of liberal and Communist intellectuals in all disciplines which was commissioned by the Soviets, tried to mobilize liberal sentiment for the Communist-backed Spanish Republicans, which would thus draw the Western democracies into a war with Hitler, with whom Stalin ultimately sought to forge an alliance himself. Thus, Spain was a proxy war for Stalin against the Fascists for a time, which he ultimately sought to abandon after provoking the Fascists and liberals to fight against each other.

Not to put too fine a point on the matter of liberal anti-Fascism, though: In his 1940 essay “The Lion and the Unicorn,” Orwell indicts the conservative, pacifist, or otherwise cowardly elements of the British government in the 1930s, who at best turned a blind eye to Mussolini and Hitler, and at worst vocally praised them, right up to the German bombings of Britain in 1940.

Many of Franco’s supporters abroad, and particularly in the U.S. and U.K., were Catholics and anti-Communists. The Catholic Church in Spain, and many Catholic clergy in the U.S., actively supported Franco for his purported defense of the faith against godless Communism. And of course, there were those who believed early on that Soviet Communism was a more dangerous international threat than Fascism.
9 In *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War*, the authors were mailed a questionnaire with the somewhat leading questions: “Are you for, or against, the legal Government and the People of Republican Spain?” and “Are you for, or against, Franco and Fascism?” (Cunningham 51). The results were more than slightly unbalanced. There were 127 published replies in favor of the Republic, five against it, and sixteen neutral. Pro-Republican authors included W.H. Auden, Samuel Beckett, Cyril Connolly, Theodore Dreiser, Ford Madox Ford, Aldous Huxley, C.L.R. James, Pablo Neruda, Sean O’Casey, V.S. Pritchett, and Stephen Spender. Three who pettishly claimed to be neutral were H.G. Wells, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound (who would infamously go on to actively support the Italian Fascist government in World War II). Two who voiced support for Franco were the WWI veteran and writer Edmund Blunden and the staunchly Catholic Evelyn Waugh.

10 The CPUSA’s *Writers Take Sides*’ results were even more lopsided: 410 writers voiced support for the Spanish Republic, seven declared neutrality, and only one professed support for Franco (that was popular novelist Gertrude Atherton).

11 Of the 148 respondents in *Authors Take Sides*, there were only a few notable cases where the writers objected to the Left Review’s tactic of sensationalizing the case for the Republic. One of the Republic’s supporters, journalist Raymond Postgate, urged a level-headed view of war in general, and recognized that war cannot possibly acquit one side of its own atrocities: “War means such atrocities, and whoever begins the conflict they are soon committed on both sides. Judgements [sic] given under the influence of such stories are unstable and emotional decisions; I wish that every supporter of the Spanish Government who relies on them would look into his mind and find a surer basis for his opinion.” One of the sixteen “neutral” writers was novelist Vita Sackville-West, who said she could not see any difference between Fascism and Communism because they both “bully and oppress the individual.” She questioned the pamphlet’s focus on the notion of the legality of the Republic: “You stress ‘the legal Government’ of Spain, as the Government you wish to support. Is this because it is the legal Government, or because it is a Communist Government? If because it is the legal Government, then you ought also to be prepared to support Hitler or Mussolini in the event of a rebellion against them….Therefore what you mean is that you want to see Communism established in Spain as well as in Russia, and you do not care a snap of the fingers whether a Government is ‘legal’ or not.”

12 Even William Faulkner, America’s preeminent modernist novelist, whose works very seldom and only obliquely engaged with political issues abroad, got caught up in the furor and voiced his response in the CPUSA’s *Writers Take Sides*: “I most sincerely wish to go on record as being unalterably opposed to Franco and Fascism, to all violations of the legal government and outrages against the people of Republican Spain” (qtd. in Miller 145).

13 In *Understanding Fiction* (1943), Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren sum up the New Critical stance on fiction’s relation to the external “ideas” that make up its content in that “the mere presence in a piece of fiction of an idea which is held to be important in itself on ethical, religious, philosophical, sociological, or other grounds, does not necessarily indicate anything about the importance of the work,” but rather the idea is “important in a story in so far as it is incorporated into the total structure—in so far as the story lives out the idea and, in the process of living, modifies the idea” (xvii-xviii). Thus, the “ideas” of the external world provide content for the story to process and transform, but the critical value of the story cannot be reduced to the content alone. The story might present public ideas for the reader in a new light, but that does not necessarily mean that the author intended any sort of political critique. Tellingly, Robert Penn Warren claimed of his own novel *All the King’s Men* (1946), which was closely based on the events of Huey P. Long’s governorship in Louisiana in the 1930s, that he merely took those political events as his raw material for the novel, but intended to craft a novel that dealt with moral and ethical dilemmas in general rather than any actual critique of American politics (Blotner 223-28).
Orwell recalls a fortuitous chance encounter with Miller in Paris in 1936, right before Orwell was about to head south to join the POUM in Barcelona. Orwell recounts: “[w]hat intrigued me most about him was to find that he felt no interest in the Spanish war whatever. He merely told me in forcible terms that to go to Spain at that moment was the act of an idiot…. He could understand anyone going there from purely selfish motives, out of curiosity, for instance, but to mix oneself up in such things from a sense of obligation was sheer stupidity. In any case my ideas about combating Fascism, defending democracy, etc. etc. were all baloney” (“Inside” 519).

Curiously, Howe had no published commentary on Hemingway other than a 1981 review he wrote of Carlos Baker’s *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters, 1917-1961*. In this piece, Howe dismisses the corpus of Hemingway’s letters as merely a means of his own self-promotion, which overall never truly reveal Hemingway’s own inner life. Howe revealingly appraises Hemingway’s best work with creating “a moral style, a fragmentary code that might serve as a substitute for a vanished morality”; yet Howe suspects that in Hemingway’s waning years, his view of life was perhaps “no longer adequate (to him, to others) in the age of totalitarianism.” Perhaps Howe’s focus here on Hemingway as prose stylist explains why he did not focus on Hemingway as political novelist.

After a long period of literary inactivity, Hemingway wrote most of his novel *To Have and Have Not* in the year before his first trip to the Spanish Front in 1937. By all accounts, Hemingway struggled mightily with his writing of the book in which he tried to incorporate the labor disputes and political struggles of Depression-era America into the central drama. The novel is important, though, in that it showed his first published attempt to meld the moral, existential struggles of his protagonist, Harry Morgan, with a visceral, unsophisticated critique of Depression-era American capitalism, as summed up in Morgan’s complaint: “my kids ain’t going to have their bellies hurt and I ain’t going to dig sewers for the government for less money than will feed them….I don’t know who made the laws but I know there ain’t no law that you got to go hungry” (68). This sentiment is virtually echoed in Hemingway’s naïve solidarity with the oppressed Spanish peasants discussed herein.

Hemingway’s printed response in *Authors Take Sides* was one of the plainest in the whole collection: “Just like any honest man I am against Franco and Fascism in Spain” (qtd. in Miller 143). He relies on the concept of “honesty” to speak volumes about the necessity of opposing Fascism, and he would not elaborate upon this stance in public until his speech to the 1937 American Writers Congress, when he stated that his reasons for opposing Fascism were largely a matter of artistic integrity, where a Fascist regime would make it impossible for any courageous artist to work.

Hemingway and Dos Passos were both commissioned to write the screenplay for *The Spanish Earth*, a pro-Republican propaganda film directed by Joris Ivens and bankrolled by the Popular Front. During their time in Spain in 1937, Dos Passos became increasingly disillusioned about the project and Hemingway took increasing control, to the point where Dos Passos was removed from the official credits for the film altogether. In the summer of 1937, Ivens and Hemingway presented the film in a private White House screening to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. According to Hemingway, the Roosevelts were “very moved” by the film but wished the filmmakers would “put more propaganda in it” (Baker[b] 460).

Hemingway revealed a reverence for the craft of writing that was sentimental in a similar way. In an oddly metacritical passage that Scribners’ titled “On Writing” in the complete *Nick Adams Stories*, Hemingway, through Nick Adams’s meditations, alternates between insisting that writing should be an unmediated task of describing the world through one’s immediate sensations, while also believing that such art is transcendent and almost divinely inspired. On the one hand, Hemingway frames the act of writing in terms of earthy, martial struggle, akin to fly fishing or bullfighting: “You had to do it from inside yourself. There wasn’t any trick….It was deadly serious. You could do it if you fought it out. If you’d lived right with your eyes” (239). Yet Hemingway valorizes Cezanne’s painting as art at a level that Nick can only hope to attain: “Nobody had ever written about country like that. He felt almost holy about it” (ibid.). Despite his qualifications (insisting his praise of the painter is not cultish), and his attempts to rein in his enthusiasm, Hemingway’s sentiment about writing show through just as Robert Jordan’s carefully regulated, yet effusive reminiscences of ideology do in terms of divine inspiration.
On this score, Hemingway said to his American friend Joe North while in Spain, “I like Communists when they’re soldiers, but when they’re priests, I hate them” (qtd. in Cooper 92).

Stephen Koch’s *The Breaking Point* provides a fascinating reconstruction of these events through rigorous historical and biographical research.

By 1937, Dos Passos had already become disgusted with the Communist Party, of which he had been a member since the late 1920s out of a sense of social mission for the working poor. His thankless work on *The Spanish Earth*—on which he was never credited—and his betrayal by Hemingway, were the decisive events that militarized him against Communism and began his long swing rightward for the rest of his life. Dos Passos wrote the first installment of his *DC* trilogy, titled *Adventures of a Young Man*, in 1939 as a direct attack on the Communist Party. In this American bildungsroman, the hero comes of age through various episodes of political activism and eventually goes off to Spain after a series of betrayals by his CP comrades, where he is eventually captured and forced to charge a machine-gun battery to his death.

There are apocryphal stories of the actual political murders that Hemingway committed during wartime. In his controversial *Hemingway in Cuba*, Norberto Fuentes claims that Hemingway joined in the shooting of suspected fascist prisoners in a garbage dump, but does not provide any evidence except citing an offhand reference to a garbage dump in a letter (Cooper 94).

The 1949 edited volume *The God That Failed* offered damning testimony by writers who were former Communists or fellow travelers: Arthur Koestler, Richard Wright, André Gide, Ignazio Silone, Stephen Spender, and Louis Fischer. The volume did much to end the Western romance with Communism, with essays from those who spent the better part of the previous decade or two embracing the party, some ardently.

Malraux’s literary reputation took a curious turn, as he went from being critically acclaimed to largely ignored in the span of his lifetime. This is doubtless due to the larger-than-life public persona he cultivated as a literary and critical genius, military entrepreneur, adventurer, and statesman. Malraux’s literary stock plummeted in the postwar years when he devoted his professional life to politics and renounced his Communist allegiances of the 1930s. Also, as Olivier Todd details in his biography of Malraux, many of the stories Malraux told about his earlier military exploits were blatantly fabricated, which no doubt led to his loss of credibility in all quarters. Hemingway, who by all accounts was repelled by Malraux as a rival literary-celebrity in the Spanish war, sniffed out Malraux’s fakeries in his war stories while praising the vividness of Malraux’s writing on the war in *Man’s Hope* (*Men at War* xxx).

Due to his military service during the French resistance in World War II, General De Gaulle appointed Malraux as his own Minister of Information in 1945-46, and then Minister of Cultural Affairs during De Gaulle’s presidency from 1959 to 1969.

Understandably, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* launched more politically motivated criticism over the years than any of Hemingway’s other fiction. Joseph Warren Beach saw the novel as expressly political, as he argues in his 1941 study *American Fiction: 1920-1940*. Other critics have argued that the novel is without politics, such as Lawrence R. Broer in *Hemingway’s Spanish Tragedy* (1973) and Richard B. Hovey in *Hemingway: The Inward Terrain* (1968). Others have argued that Hemingway tried but failed to adequately address the political content of his novel, such as Alvah Bessie in his “Review of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*” in *New Masses* (1940), in which he took up issue with what he saw as Hemingway’s lambasting of the Soviet command in Spain. In his own argument, James L. Kastely is informed by David E. Zehr’s claim in his 1976 essay “Bourgeois Politics: Ernest Hemingway’s Case in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*” that the confusion about Hemingway’s political views is because Hemingway does not wish to debate the rightness of the Republican cause at all, which he believes does not need to be justified. Hemingway’s objective in the novel, then, is to debate the need for and consequences of political engagement in the first place.
In *Man’s Hope*, Malraux, by contrast, addressed the skepticism of the charges of atrocity by toeing the party line and insisting that only the Fascists were capable of committing them. In one scene, the Republican commander Scali shows a captured Fascist pilot a photo of a Republican prisoner with his eyes gouged out. The Fascist pilot accuses the photo of being doctored, to which Scali responds sarcastically: “Very well, that explains it. We pluck out the eyes of our best pilots just to make these photographs! We use Chinese torturers, communists, for the job!” (142).

Jeffrey Meyers points out that Hemingway plausibly modeled Pilar on Gertrude Stein, who bore worldly experience that at first surpassed Hemingway’s own and who first introduced Hemingway to Spain in the 1920s. Also, curiously, *Pilar* is the name of Hemingway’s fishing boat that he kept at his home in Key West since 1935.

**Chapter 3: Severed Heads and Power Lines: Postcolonial Violence in Modernist and Postmodernist Fiction**

1 In fact, the much-publicized fifteen-year feud between Naipaul and his longtime friend Paul Theroux, the third author who shared the stage with them, actually did ignite that day. Naipaul conspicuously ignored Theroux on stage and refused to talk to him afterwards about it, for reasons known only to Naipaul. Apparently Naipaul could overlook his literary and political differences with Rushdie better than he could any personal grievance he had with Theroux that day (Lo Dico, “Literary Feud”).

2 Rushdie’s extraordinary situation of victimhood as a result of the reception to his fiction is well documented, and can now be seen in perfect clarity as one of the most bizarre literary and political controversies in modern history. In 1989, Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini made Rushdie the target of his *fatwa*, calling upon all faithful Muslims to kill the author and his publishers wherever they may be found, to avenge Rushdie’s supposedly irreverent portrayal of the Prophet Mohammad in *The Satanic Verses*. The Iranian edict was unprecedented in that a head of state publicly issued orders for the murder of a private citizen of another country, thus defying all codes of legality and national sovereignty, which necessitated the special protection of the British government. As Rushdie recalled in *Joseph Anton*, his autobiographical account of the case, “A mullah with a long arm was reaching out across the world to squeeze the life out of him. That was a police matter” (96). In the years ahead, thousands of people were killed in riots in India, Pakistan, and Turkey and two translators of Rushdie’s works were murdered. It is no exaggeration to claim that a novelist had never in all of history caused such international furor. Rushdie intended his novel to serve as a critique of the Koran as a humanly constructed text, exploring the notion that sacred texts have a materiality of their own and are subject to human flaws in their authorship. Thus, Rushdie portrayed Mohammad as fallible as any other human, subject to the same misunderstandings and worldly temptations as anyone else, which temporarily entered into his recitation of the text of the Koran. The Iranian ayatollahs, following the lead of mullahs in India a few months earlier, found that fictive operation blasphemous in itself, and Khomeini’s *fatwa* was a raw and visceral reaction on a religious, social, and cultural level that went far beyond the intellectual exercise in fiction that Rushdie had intended. A fuller discussion that could even begin to explore the mass phenomenon of the *fatwa* against Rushdie and the worldwide reaction to it would be far beyond the scope of this chapter.

For his part, though, Naipaul had come under fire eight years earlier for an actual critique of the Islamist revolution in Iran that was rooted in his personal experience. The attacks came not from the Iranians, but from Western liberals. When Naipaul’s travelogue *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* was published in 1981, Naipaul was castigated by liberal intellectuals for what they saw as his Islamophobic critique of the Muslim societies he visited in Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia. By 1981, Naipaul had published numerous critical essays on societies in Africa, Latin America, and India—a based on his travels there. Indeed, over the previous decade, no one wrote about Third World social decay in more lurid detail than Naipaul. Naipaul condemned all of those societies as socially volatile, politically corrupt, and irreparably dysfunctional in every way. Yet none of his previous works of nonfiction came under such fire as *Among the Believers*. Even after U.S.-Iranian relations had reached a boiling point with the capture and hostage-holding of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, American and British critics were quick to castigate Naipaul for what they saw as his barely concealed racism and cultural and religious insensitivity. Years later, Naipaul claimed that “I wrote this book and the good people tore my book to pieces….My
thoughts on the subject were not welcome. I was considered to be running down brave representatives of new civilizations” (qtd. in Getlin). The critical furor over Among the Believers further calcified Naipaul’s enmity against liberals in the academy and the literary establishment.

Thus, in 1989, when many of these same liberals banded around Rushdie in defense of literary freedom against tyranny and terrorism (and only a few actually condemned Rushdie for his supposed cultural and religious insensitivity towards Muslims), Naipaul refused to support him. Naipaul dismissed Rushdie in that “I don’t know his books, but I’ve been aware of his statements. I found them usually left-wing and trivial and antiquated” (qtd. in French 434). What’s more, Naipaul wryly dismissed Khomeini’s fatwa against the author of The Satanic Verses as “an extreme form of literary criticism” (ibid.). When pressed about the topic in a 1989 interview, Naipaul contrasted Rushdie’s ordeal with his own lashing by liberals for Among the Believers: “Certain causes are good, and then other causes become good,” Naipaul noted. “Now the good people are saying something else. I wish the good people were a little more consistent” (qtd. in Getlin). Ironically, Naipaul’s critique of Islamist ideology and the rage that it stoked in Iran was prescient in itself of the very ordeal that Rushdie was to face just eight years later. By his own account, Rushdie had a bone to pick with Naipaul precisely for the stereotyping he found himself subject to as a result of Among the Believers. Rushdie resented being lumped in with all other Muslims by Robert Gottlieb, editor-in-chief of Knopf when Midnight’s Children was published, because Gottlieb had read Naipaul’s book shortly before meeting Rushdie and said he didn’t figure he could actually like any Muslims after reading it. Rushdie was and is avowedly not a follower of Islam or of any religion (Joseph Anton 63-64).

3 I use the now-antiquated “Three Worlds” terminology to speak in the dominant geopolitical terms used during the Cold War, throughout most of the authors’ writing careers. The terms are now considered overly broad, essentialist, nationalist, even racist, but I use them merely to express the geopolitical viewpoints of the time from the metropolitan subject position from which Naipaul and Rushdie were writing. The First World thus refers to the U.S., U.K., Western Europe, and their allies; the Second World to the Soviet Union, China, and allies; and the Third World to non-affiliated countries throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

4 Helen Hayward says of Naipaul’s views on imperialism that “[t]here is an unresolved and important ambivalence in his attitude towards the history of empire: he conceives of colonial rule both as a system of base pillage and as a lost ideal of order, and he views the metropolitan center at once as fulfilling and betraying its ideal” (4).

5 Indeed, Naipaul’ most recent book, which rounds out his travelogue trilogy on India (following 1964’s An Area of Darkness and 1977’s A Wounded Civilization), is called A Million Mutinies Now (2011), in which he shows India as fragmented by the same micropolitics that defies any attempt at centralized governance, which he also sees occurring in every other postcolonial nation he writes about.

6 Deleuze and Guattari’s work on schizophrenia as the postmodern ontological position is particularly useful here, as in Anti-Oedipus and A Thousand Plateaus.

7 Indeed, according to biographer Patrick French, Naipaul intended the title “Guerillas” to function ironically, since there are no actual guerillas that we see in the story, only the boys in Jimmy’s gang (373).

8 V.S. Naipaul, I believe, was only ever really interested in V.S. Naipaul. He had no use for the popular cultural trends of the time, which might have compelled him to be more politically involved and invested in left-wing politics in the U.K., his adopted homeland. Though he sought out their company once he became a distinguished author, Naipaul spoke of many of his British literary peers with contempt.
In this very sense, Naipaul is a direct spiritual descendant of Conrad. Indeed, Conrad was as cynical of revolutionary politics (as discussed in Chapter 1 herein) as Naipaul (and for that reason also castigated as being politically conservative, even reactionary), though Conrad had borne witness to the personal toll that such activism takes on the activist’s family. Conrad also addressed many of the abuses of European colonialism upon the native population in works such as *Heart of Darkness* and “An Outpost of Progress,” and in *Nostromo* he presciently prefigured the postcolonial political quandary faced by many nations after independence: the resource-rich nations’ exploitation by Western entrepreneurs and corporations, the cycles of corrupt dictatorships set up, ousted, and set up again by populist coups, and the spiritual malaise and desperation felt by the disappointed and dispossessed young men in these countries. Certainly Naipaul treads on all of this territory in even more rigorous detail in his novels, even revisiting some seventy years later in *A Bend in the River* the Congo that Conrad first traversed in *Heart of Darkness*, the European Marlow’s own nihilistic view of the country validated even further by the Indian immigrant-settler Salim.

Throughout his career, Naipaul has despaired of any constructive end to the nationalist and revolutionary movements of the postcolonial world. This stance is well-documented and resonant throughout his entire corpus, such as his 1975 essay, “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa.” Instead of seeing the rise of the African nations from the ruins of the British Empire in the 1960s as bearing out the promise of African ingenuity and prosperity, Naipaul sees these nations as corrupt and deformed from birth, their leaders nothing other than butchers of their own people. Such cynicism was in fact justified in nations such as Zaire and Uganda, which both saw the downfall of incumbent dictators and installation of new ones through brutal civil wars within the first decade of independence. Naipaul saw Zaire’s president Mobutu as nothing other than a delusional madman who crafted himself as a man of the people, cut from the same cloth as his Ugandan neighbor Idi Amin. Moreover, Naipaul saw the citizens of these nations as deformed by their ignorance of the mechanisms of the capitalist world around them, disappointed by the false promises of capitalism that they can’t seem to attain, and always liable to resort to violence if provoked. This African nihilism is part of a perpetual cycle of violence covered up by Mobutu’s sentimental claims of authenticity. This essay raises many of the issues that Naipaul would explore in *A Bend in the River*. Moreover, Naipaul claims that dictators like Mobutu are ignorantly given worldwide prestige by celebrities such as James Brown, who praised Mobutu as the latest champion of black power. Brown performed in Zaire before the legendary “Rumble in the Jungle” boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in 1974.

On his idea for *Magic Seeds*, Naipaul said, “I went to India and met some people who had been involved in this guerrilla business, middle-class people who were rather vain and foolish. There was no revolutionary grandeur to it. Nothing” (qtd. in Adams). If Naipaul weren’t predisposed to cynicism about revolutionary activism, this sampling was apparently all that was needed.

In actual events, after the murder of Gale Benson, Malik has one of his minions kill one of their fellow conspirators with the same cutlass used to kill her, which for Naipaul shows the full extent of Malik’s paranoia.

In his essay, Naipaul derides the celebrity endorsements that Malik received when he was hailed as a revolutionary figure and champion of Black Power. He cites Muhammad Ali, John Lennon, and Yoko Ono as being outspoken friends and supporters of Malik, with John and Yoko visiting his commune in Trinidad in the year prior to Malik’s killing of Gale Benson. In the essay, Naipaul even claims that Malik was preparing for the visit of a second Beatle, Ringo Starr, right before the murder.

Of the literary origins of the name “Thrushcross Grange” from *Wuthering Heights*, Peter Roche tells Jane, “I don’t think it means anything. I don’t think Jimmy sees himself as Heathcliff or anything like that. He took a writing course, and it was one of the books he had to read. I think he just likes the name” (4). Furthermore, in his diary fantasies, Jimmy imagines that Jane picks up a copy of *Wuthering Heights* from his bookshelf, impressed, to which Jimmy responds, “Ah, you are looking at that great work of the Brontës. What a gifted family, it makes you believe in heredity” (34). Thus, the Brontë novel connotes a realm of high culture and good breeding for Jimmy, in contrast to the squalor of his actual commune, built on the ruins of an abandoned industrial park.
By comparison, the protagonists of white modernist novelists of the time—Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John O’Hara, Robert Penn Warren—lived in positions of luxury. William Faulkner is one of the only male American modernist writers of this era who pervasively addressed situations of social and economic marginality through the subject positions of his white male characters, and he certainly addresses race relations conspicuously throughout most of his works. This is not to dismiss the often-intense situations of privation and despair that these other writers’ characters face in their novels; it is just that identitarian concerns play no part there.

Philip Fisher claims that “The descent from rage to regret and sorrow, from causing death to comprehending—in mourning—the full reality of death, from the most volcanic of states to the most immobilized, all have about them, as a path, a seeming naturalness resembling that linking exertion and exhaustion,” and that “such paths from state to state control the unfolding of the work as a whole” (36).

While Bigger’s murders are gruesome, the sexual threat that Bigger poses upon women is benign by comparison. Bigger’s accidental suffocation of Mary quells his motion to kiss her as she lies drunkenly passed out in her bedroom, and his earlier sexual gestures towards her were done purely in fantasy, as he and a male friend masturbate in a movie theater to newsreel footage of her in a bathing suit, vacationing in Europe.

Indeed, violent sexual violation holds special symbolic value for Naipaul. In his 1975 essay “The Return of Eva Perón,” he writes of the disenfranchised young men in Argentina for whom, he claims, sodomy is a special form of domination and degradation of women which is abhorred even by prostitutes, where “by imposing on her what prostitutes reject, and what he knows to be a kind of sexual black mass, the Argentine macho….consciously dishonors his victim” (155). Naipaul sees such violation as a means to gain some sense of dignity, prestige, and masculine agency for men who feel otherwise emasculated.

E.L. Doctorow takes an identical stance in his creating of an alternate, fictive reality in his novels in which actual historical figures interact with each other and with his fictional characters, which Doctorow intends to challenge the orthodoxies of what he calls the “regime truth” and to offer alternative interpretations, or alternative versions of reality in a politically subversive way, through fiction (“False Documents” 17-20).

Naipaul, crucially, had no use for the fantasy stylings of magical realism, claiming that the form itself is inadequate for conveying the urgency of political reality on the ground. When asked to comment on the magical realist techniques of García Márquez, Naipaul said that “[t]here’s far too much reality in Colombia and writers must express it with realism rather than resort to all these gimmicks” (qtd. in French 438-39). Furthermore, Naipaul claimed in 1987 that “[t]here is a way currently in vogue of writing about degraded and corrupt countries…the way of fantasy and extravagance” (qtd. in Gorra 144). Such an approach “dodges all the issues. It is safe…empty, morally and intellectually” and “makes writing…an aspect of the corruption of the countries out of which it emerges” (ibid.). For Naipaul, the writer has no useful business veering off into fantasy if he is to provide a responsible interpretation of actual events. Thus, the political events in Colombia can and should be interpreted through realistic fiction rather than magical realism that only obscures the real-life issues involved.

The name “Max Ophuls” refers to the German filmmaker of the same name, who eventually settled in Hollywood after escaping from Nazi Germany, and whose son, Marcel Ophuls, went on to forge a successful career in film directing as well, including the renowned documentary The Sorrow and the Pity about the French capitulation to Hitler. In the novel, Max’s daughter India (later Kashmira) Ophuls becomes an accomplished documentary filmmaker in her own right, creating an acclaimed documentary about the war in Kashmir.

Paul Berman, in Terror and Liberalism (2004), argues that millennial Islamism is actually a Middle Eastern version of European “mass pathological movements” like Nazism and Bolshevism, and grew out of similar conditions of social unrest. Martin Amis makes a similar claim in his collected essays in The Second Plane (2008), focusing on the moral nihilism of the angry, repressed young men who embrace Islamism as the most attractive political option available to them.
Indeed, in recalling his own travails with his worldwide death sentence by the Iranian government, Rushdie believes he would not have stood a chance of surviving if the *fatwa* had been issued during the age of Google, when news of the reward and rumors of his location could have spread even more swiftly and ubiquitously than the TV and print news could manage in 1989 (*Joseph Anton* 582).

Though Rushdie denies that Solanka correlates in any direct way to himself, in *Joseph Anton* Rushdie tells a similar, chilling story of how his own father, after separation from his mother, would stand above Salman’s bed at night and drunkenly curse him with violent obscenities. This form of emotional terrorism doubtless has real-life psychological correlation to Rushdie’s own childhood trauma.

Chapter 4: The Curious Knot: Cyber-Capital, Terrorism, and Art’s Third Way in DeLillo’s Millennial Novels

Of the critics who claim that DeLillo’s fiction plays out deconstruction’s theoretical mystifications of language, Ryan Simmons claims that *Mao II* is all about the author’s anxieties about the impossibility of commanding language. Some of DeLillo’ critics see the author as humanistic, then, precisely through his project of addressing the dehumanizing forces of cyber-capitalism, such as Linda S. Kauffman and John Carlos Rowe.

Twentieth-century theories on the networked nature of power go back at least as far as the cultural critics of the Frankfurt School such as Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno. In the late twentieth century, Michel Foucault made the most influential critique of modern power as a matter of governmentality, where the state’s sovereignty is diffuse and enacted through human relations at their most basic functions, as he discusses in his essays “Governmentality” and “Biopolitics” among many others. Gilles Deleuze explores the rhizomatic nature of power in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, and Jean Baudrillard critiques mass media’s power to shape and influence public discourse throughout his career; his books *Fatal Strategies* and *The Spirit of Terrorism* are especially illuminating in discussing the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and news media.

This fictive observation of the spectacularity of American politics goes back as far as Hawthorne’s short story “My Kinsman, Major Molineaux” where the painted, masked lynch-mob overtakes Robin, who is unable to discern their political message—perhaps the Boston Tea Party itself?—but who is captivated by the theater of their parade.

In his introduction to *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, Brian Massumi sums up the very definition of postmodernism as “extreme change accompanied by utter conservatism” (18), where nothing ever seems to change in real-existing conditions, even though we get the impression that everything changes every day. Popular critiques of the populist Occupy Wall Street movement that launched in 2011 are driven by this same principled objection: these people are just protesting for the sake of protesting, without a coherent project or plan to drive their movement forward.

In 2003, Abas Amini, an Iranian refugee, sewed his eyes, mouth, and ears shut to protest being denied asylum in the UK. A photo of Amini’s face, lit up against a black background, depicts the man in what appears to be a state of pain, his eyelids infected and dried pus and mucus caked onto his face (see Coulter-Smith and Owen). The power of the image is derived from these signs of physical suffering, the phobic object, yet is intended to point metaphorically to political oppression beyond. This physical suffering is a metaphorical expression of the voicelessness and blindness of stateless refugees worldwide. The immediate affect upon anyone who sees these photos may be horror and repulsion, and this shock is part of the dissident’s and the photographer’s intention, before the viewer learns the back-story behind the spectacle. At first, the shock of the phobic object may obscure the intended political critique. Yet, though the broader critique requires at least a little bit of explanation, I can at least rationalize my horror over the image once I realize that it’s tied to an otherwise comprehensible political critique. Terrorists and performance artists may foster such contemplation through the spectacles that they create. However, the other side of this equation, as Hozic points out, is that we don’t bother to find out the real causes of the spectacle, that we’re
distanced from the real underlying suffering precisely because of the spectacle’s shock, which many of us don’t see past.

6 DeLillo earlier addressed this exact issue, with almost the same frame of language use, in his End Zone (1973). Here, protagonist Gary Harkness is morbidly obsessed with nuclear annihilation, and he voices his concerns about his inability to conceive of the mass destruction of nuclear war: “Major, there’s no way to express thirty million dead. No words. So certain men are recruited to reinvent the language” (85). Major Staley lectures on the topic, valorizing nuclear warfare through purely abstract military euphemism, to which Harkness insists that the words “don’t explain, they don’t clarify, they don’t express. They’re painkillers. Everything becomes abstract. I admit it’s fascinating in a way. I also admit the problem goes deeper than just saying some crypto-Goebbels in the Pentagon is distorting the language” (ibid.). Almost forty years later, DeLillo posited Elster as just such a would-be conspirator within the Pentagon who sought to redesign military language to refer directly to the actual carnage unleashed.

7 It seems significant here to point out that one of the books found in Kaczynski’s Montana cabin where he was eventually captured was Conrad’s The Secret Agent. Kaczynski claimed to admire The Professor as the true hero of the novel, and with the character’s cerebral rationalizing of his fantasies of annihilation, and his wreaking destruction through explosives, one can see the correlation between these fictive and real bomb-makers, both of whom also happened to be former professional academics.

8 In DeLillo’s 2003 Cosmopolis, his first novel published after 9/11, he explores the limits of cyber-capitalism’s power to encompass and account for all contingencies, and to extend all aspects of the life of billionaire Eric Packer. Revealingly, Packer sees a rash of violent anti-capitalist protests on Wall Street as situationist terrorism that is merely circumscribed within cyber-capitalism, realizing that there is nothing external to the cyber-capitalist system. Packer’s financial adviser Kinski claims of rioting protesters on Wall Street that “[t]his is the free market itself. These people are a fantasy generated by the market” rather than barbarians assaulting the system from outside (90). Kinski points out the futility of this protest, as the protesters don’t even realize how far inside the system they actually are: “They don’t exist outside the market. There is nowhere they can go to be on the outside. There is no outside” (ibid.).

9 The echoes of the worldwide furor over Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses are clear here, as DeLillo wrote Mao II immediately after those events. When asked about his engagement with the Rushdie controversy in Mao II, DeLillo replied, “I don’t know how deep it is, but it’s there. It’s the connection between the writer as the champion of the self, and those forces that are threatened by this. Such totalitarian movements can be seen in miniature in the very kind of situation Rushdie is in. He’s a hostage” (Passaro). Ironically, both Rushdie and DeLillo worked as advertising copywriters for the New York firm Ogilvy & Mather (Passaro).

10 By its publication date of 2007, Falling Man would join an already-growing list of post-9/11 fiction that tried to grasp the catastrophe from different angles, which included Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Joseph O’Neil’s Netherland, Claire Messud’s The Emperor’s Children, Ian McEwan’s Saturday, Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist, John Updike’s Terrorist, and Martin Amis’s “The Last Days of Mohammad Atta.”

11 It is notable that John Updike addressed the U.S. climate of terror, and Islamist terrorism specifically, with his final novel Terrorist in 2006. Here, Updike attempted to render the subjectivity of Ahmad, an alienated seventeen-year-old boy of Egyptian and Irish-American parentage. What is most notable about this character study is that Ahmad seems to be merely the same alienated, Western, white, male subject that populates all of Updike’s other books. His different ethnicity and religion are merely cosmetic appurtenances to the same old character. DeLillo takes a similar tack in Falling Man with Hammad, and one could critique DeLillo’s rendering of the same type of character for the same reasons. More on that will follow in the concluding chapter herein.
The “Falling Man” iconography is manifested, uncannily(?), in numerous American popular culture venues, such as the animated opening title sequence to the TV series Mad Men (2007-present). The anachronism is conspicuous here—the series is set in the first half of the 1960s, yet the entire series is designed to serve as a prehistory of the present day, showing a period of transition to late-twentieth-century neoliberalism and cultural attitudes. The series protagonist Don Draper could easily have been one of the business executives who were killed in the World Trade Center, had he lived forty years later.

DeLillo’s real-life inspiration for Janiak is the performance artist Kerry Skarbakka, who staged a similar series of falls that evoked the fall in Drew’s photograph. On June 14, 2005, Skarbakka staged a series of thirty jumps from the five-story rooftop of Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art. He made sure that each jump was captured by various photographers gathered on the scene, and the photos were eventually compiled in a photo essay titled Life Goes On. Both Skarbakka and Janiak’s art derives its power to shock precisely by its explicit reference back to 9/11 in its viewers’ minds.

However, their methods of transmitting the performance differ widely, and this is where DeLillo’s vision for the ideal performance artist becomes most clear. Skarbakka intends his falls to represent the falls from the WTC towers explicitly, and that the photos captured of his falls imitate those taken of jumpers on 9/11. The photo essay of his falls would ensure that images of Skarbakka’s performances were disseminated to a wide audience, so that a viewer need not have stood in the audience outside of the Chicago museum to see at least an image of the performance. Skarbakka eagerly talked to the news media about his performance with the intention of publicizing it, as well as to clarify misconceptions about it. Skarbakka claimed that “I wanted to be able to respond intelligently, conceptually, responsibly to what was going on” and that he would “make an exodus from the world of making art” if he could not find some way of addressing 9/11 (qtd. in Duvall 160). By contrast, DeLillo’s Janiak shunned the media and retained his anonymity (even if Lianne was able to find out all about him through a Google search). In a conscious gesture at the difference between the two artists, DeLillo’s Janiak refuses an invitation from the Guggenheim Museum to stage his jumps there for an audience, which would thus showcase it conspicuously as “art”—which is exactly the sort of venue that Skarbakka sought. In refusing publicity, and thus the opportunity for photographic documentation and dissemination of images, Janiak’s performances are unpredictable, unreproducible, and each completely unique. This is the ideal of performance art that DeLillo valorizes in his fiction, the forms of art that are unincorporated and therefore fresh and new.

Lianne’s emotive response to the spectacle is reminiscent of the outpourings of sympathy upon witnessing spectacles of suffering among some of DeLillo’s other characters. In Libra, Wynn Everett’s wife has a particularly moving response to Lee Harvey Oswald’s televised death, and she believes that his helpless gaze was fixed on her in the moment of his shooting. Similarly, in Underworld, upon viewing Sergei Eisenstein’s fictive film Unterwelt, Klara Sax and Esther are deeply disturbed by one particular scene in which the scientist irradiates one of the prisoners with a proto ray-gun. As the victim’s skin starts to bubble and melt, the scientist draws near to him and gently places his hand on the victim’s cheek in a sensuous caress, and something like adoration on his face. For most people in the audience, this film and this particular scene are merely bizarre and confusing, but two particularly sensitive people in the audience who are attuned to art’s ability to disturb and unsettle through their own art, come undone by it.

Richter claimed that his 18 October 1977 cycle that depicts the last days of the conspirators is a form of “leave-taking”: in an “ideological” sense, the work represents “a leave-taking from a specific doctrine of salvation and beyond that, from the illusion that unacceptable circumstances of life can be changed by this conventional expedient of violent struggle,” adding that “this kind of revolutionary thought and action is futile and passé” (qtd. in Danchev 101). Richter claims he did not intend the paintings to be “partisan” in any political sense, since “[g]rief is not tied to any ‘cause’. Nor is compassion” (102). Alex Danchev claims that Richter’s paintings are “unreconciled,” “continually reformulating the question of what attitude it would be appropriate to adopt toward them” and compelling viewers to question whether they even have the conceptual tools to understand the paintings (104). Moreover, Richter said he intended the paintings to question the viewers’ underlying moral nature: “If people wanted to see these people hanged as criminals, that’s only a part of it: there’s something else that puts an additional fear into people, namely that they themselves are terrorists. And that is forbidden. So this terrorism inside all of us, that’s what generates the rage and fear, and that’s what I don’t want, anymore than I want the policeman inside myself—there’s never just one side to us. We’re always both: the State and the terrorist” (qtd. in Kauffman 360).
Conclusion: Islamists, Hijackers, and the Problems of Representation: Terrorist Subjectivities in Post-9/11 Fiction

1 See Faisal Devji’s *Landscapes of the Jihad* (2005).

2 For various reasons, art, and fiction in particular, were slow to address the phenomenon of September 11 in specific. In the months after 9/11, audiences wondered how soon it could possibly take to be able to gain a clear-eyed view of that disaster that could be conveyed through art. At a time when the likeness of the towers was being edited out of films, and (at least for a few months) films with overt violence and terrorist intrigue were being shelved, audiences eagerly anticipated how 9/11 would turn up in literature. It took about two years, but numerous authors did attempt to write novels of terrorism, and about various aspects of 9/11 in specific, with varying degrees of artfulness and acclaim. Some of the more noteworthy attempts are Jonathan Safran Foer’s bestselling *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, and John Updike’s *Terrorist*. Many other works are set in urban environments with 9/11 looming conspicuously in their backgrounds, works as diverse as Philip Roth’s *Exit Ghost*, William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* and *Spook Country*, and Afghan novelist Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*.

3 Some academic discourse does ascribe certain violent pathologies to Islam, as Bernard Lewis has done in works such as *The Crisis of Islam* and *What Went Wrong*? Lewis has been roundly condemned by generations of scholars of Islam, but his work has received a ready audience since 9/11 (AbuKhalil 18-19). Indeed, in numerous biographical accounts of the Boston Marathon bombers Tamerlan and Dzhokar Tsarnaev, the issue of both radical Islam and the violence endemic in Dagestan and Kyrgyzstan, where they both grew up, have been used to explain why these two young men, who never exhibited a history of violence in their earlier lives, could have committed such horrific acts.

4 Subsequent biographies of Osama bin Laden have done intriguing work in this vein. Lawrence Wright’s *The Looming Tower* (2006) and Steve Coll’s *The Bin Ladens* (2008) offer rich biographical detail of bin Laden’s life, providing some analysis of his violent career. What emerges in both books is a portrait of a brash, egotistical, yet impressionable young man transformed by the more violent views of the radicals around him who used his wealth, energy, and charisma for their own purposes. Wright’s book, however, blends biographical journalism on bin Laden and Al Qaeda with conspicuous pathos for the victims of their violence. In the final third of his book, Wright introduces the story of an FBI agent on the case of the 9/11 plot, who is beset by relationship problems, who embraces Catholicism in the final weeks of his life, only to be killed in the World Trade Center. Wright’s narrative meshes the subjects of his study with their victims in his attempt to capture Al Qaeda’s terrorism in all its varying dimensions.

5 As Kenneth Warren has pointed out, we can see the class and racial aspects of the world of *Native Son* functioning as an integral part of its narrative. The novel’s analytical resonance operates through the attention paid to these conditions, which are impossible to ignore. Warren claims that audience interest in the characters in subsequent fictions, though, such as the television drama *The Wire*, precludes or obfuscates any broader, deeper analysis that could be made of the socioeconomic conditions of its world.

6 In an even more different sense, fiction may act radically in compelling its audience to take action or endorse a political agenda, but it may be a reactionary one. FOX News pundits Glenn Beck, Cal Thomas, Bill O’Reilly, and Laura Ingraham have all claimed that the popularity of FOX action-drama series *24* accurately portrays the threat that terrorism poses, and the need for aggressive, neoconservative-endorsed tactics to fight it. Their logic presents this series—a fiction created by their own network—as a blatant case of wish-fulfillment.
One characteristic on which most analysts of the 9/11 hijackers agree is that all of them were relatively well-off, coming from middle-class families in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and many holding advanced degrees. This runs contrary to many of the bromides about terrorism being a poor man’s attempt at revolution. As Richard Rubenstein (1987) and numerous other scholars have explained, terrorism is in most modern cases the most extreme response of the frustrated, idealistic bourgeois intellectual, who is beset by feelings of low self-esteem and squandered potential when he is not engaged in work that he finds meaningful, nor able to reap the material rewards of the society around him.

Amis uses the term “Islamism” resolutely, linking it to the “mass pathological” European totalitarian movements as Paul Berman does. Amis claims to respect Islam itself, though as a proclaimed atheist he denounces all forms of religious belief.

Amis takes a similar agonistic stance in his fascinating study of Stalin, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (2002). Amis’s analysis of Stalinism and Soviet Communism rises to the level of polemic in parts, despite his attempts to temper it with ironic detachment. In some of his most caustic remarks, he addresses his Marxist or Marxist-sympathizing comrades: Edmund Wilson, Christopher Hitchens, and his father, Kingsley Amis, arguing how blind they were to sympathize with the most destructive and radically evil political system the world had ever seen. Both Stalinism and Islamism, Amis claims, are nihilistically committed to a utopian mission that cannot ever come to fruition, and both justify mass murder in this mission.

DeLillo claimed that “Groups like the Weather Underground were not outsiders. They were not the Other, as the Islamic terrorists are seen by those of us in the West. That has made it easier for such men and women to reenter society, and continue to be admired. I don’t think that would be the case with terrorists of other skin color or other languages” (“Intensity”). Thus, he seems to have borne this problem of otherness in mind in setting himself to create a character that is relatable to the Western reader.
WORKS CITED


Houen, Alex. *Terrorism and Modern Literature from Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson*.


VITA

Mark S. Bennett
Department of English
University of Illinois at Chicago
445 W. Briar Place, #3
Chicago, IL 60657
401 S. Morgan St. (MC 162)
Chicago, IL 60607
mbenne2@uic.edu
773.750.6191

EDUCATION

University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of English
Ph.D. in English, 2014
Dissertation: “Terrorism and Melodrama in Twentieth-Century Fiction”
  Dissertation Director: Christian K. Messenger
  Dissertation Committee: Nicholas Brown, Mark Canuel, John Huntington, Alex Kurczaba
  Examination Areas: Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Criticism;
  Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Criticism; Postcolonial Fiction,
  Theory, and Criticism; Political Theory and Philosophy
DePaul University
M.A. in English with Departmental Distinction, 2004
Thesis: “‘Savage Rednecks’ and ‘Country Bumpkins’: The Rural Anti-Idyll”
  Thesis Advisor: John Shanahan
Wittenberg University
B.A. in English with Departmental Honors, 1999
Honors Thesis: “Whitman, Ginsberg, and the Plurality of Homosexual Identities”
  Thesis Director: Robert L. Davis

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Composition Courses Taught:

English 555: Teaching College English Practicum (Fall 2012, Fall 2013)
English 161: Academic Writing II: “Writing About the Presidential Campaigns of 2008”
  (Summer 2008, Fall 2008)—recognition for Distinguished Teaching Award
English 161: Academic Writing II: “Writing About the War on Terror” (Spring 2005, Fall 2006)
English 160: Academic Writing I: “Writing in the Public Sphere” (Fall 2005, Summer 2006, Fall 2009)
English 160: Academic Writing I: “Your Voice in Twenty-First-Century America” (Fall 2010)—Blended Learning pilot course (50 percent online)
Summer Academic Learning Community (SALC), UIC TRIO / African-American Academic Network (Summer 2009, Summer 2010)—developmental writing enrichment course

Literature Courses Taught:

English 101: Introduction to Literature: “Terrorism in Literature” (Spring 2006, Fall 2006)
English 109: American Literature and Culture: “The Gothic in American Literature” (Spring 2010)
English 110: English and American Popular Genres: “Popular Film Genres” (Fall 2009)—Blended Learning pilot course (25 percent online)
English 243: Introduction to Nineteenth-Century American Literature (Fall 2007)

AWARDS AND HONORS

Distinguished Teaching Award for 2008–2009, Department of English, UIC
Finalist, Darrell Bourque Award, “Texts and Cultural Contexts” Conference, University of Louisiana at Lafayette. April 5, 2004
Travel Awards, UIC Graduate Student Council and Graduate College, 2005, 2010

CONFERENCE PANEL PRESENTATIONS

ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

Assistant Director, First-Year Writing Program, UIC (Summer 2010–Present)
- Manage FYWP daily operations, including assisting FYWP students and consulting with instructors and department staff
- Supervise office staff of four graduate assistant directors and entire FYWP instructor staff of T.A.s and lecturers (80-100 per semester)
- Develop and implement FYWP policy pertaining to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, instructor training, and discipline
- Schedule all FYWP courses and instructors each semester, collaborating with English Dept. Associate Head and Classroom Scheduling Services
- Gather and analyze data on student enrollment, grade distribution, and retention through Banner, Enterprise Data Warehouse, and survey assessment tools
- Organize, promote, and conduct Year-Opening Composition Conference and semestery Mile 8 professional development sessions
- Communicate with FYWP instructor staff through managing of Teachwrite listserv; provide instructional materials through FYWP Blackboard site
- Work with textbook publishers, negotiating book sales and tailoring products to instructional needs
- Coordinate writing placement of new students, working with the Office of Testing Services and the Placement Essay Reading Team
- Assess writing credit for transfer students through portfolio review in collaboration with each UIC college’s academic advising staff
- Coordinate Summer Enrichment Writing Workshop, including recruiting eligible students, providing logistical support, supervising SEWW coordinator and instructor staff, and attending year-round Summer College committee meetings

Graduate Assistant Director, First-Year Writing Program, UIC (Spring 2007–Fall 2008)
- Conducted classroom evaluations of new FYWP instructors
- Organized Mile 8 and Year-Opening Composition Conferences
- Coordinated portfolio review process for English 160 and 071 instructors
- Conducted portfolio reviews for transfer writing credit
- Researched nationwide trends in composition curriculum, pedagogy, technology, and assessment

Organizer and Chair, “Peace and War” Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference, UIC, April 16, 2010

Placement Exam Essay Reader, First-Year Writing Program (2007–2009)

EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE


Assistant Editor, Narrative Nonfiction, Packingtown Review: Issue 2 (Fall 2009)
Copy Editor / Proofreader, National Parent-Teacher Association, Chicago, Illinois (December 2001–August 2004)
Editorial Associate, University of Chicago Press (December 1999–December 2001)
Assistant Editor, *The Wittenberg Review of Art and Literature* (Fall 1998–Spring 1999)
News Editor, *The Wittenberg Torch* (Fall 1997–Fall 1998)

**TEACHING AND RESEARCH INTERESTS**

Composition and Rhetorical Theory
Twentieth-century American Literature
Nineteenth-century American Literature,
Twentieth-century British Literature
Postcolonial Theory and Literature
The Political Novel
Literary and Critical Theory
Political Theory and Philosophy
Film Studies: Film Theory, Popular Genres
Political Journalism

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

Modern Language Association
Council of Writing Program Administrators
American Culture Association
College English Association